

## Chyetirye

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## Chyetirye

by [SkyisGray](#)

### Summary

Even the strongest personalities, when subjected to great physical, emotional, and sexual abuses, can splinter, or dissociate.

Bucky Barnes lives a nightmare after falling from a train and being recovered by Hydra. His mind deals with the trauma by splintering into the soldier, the prisoner, the patriot, and the assassin.

Years later, they team up to save Steve Rogers.

### Notes



I hope this isn't too dark for most people. I think that the origins of the Winter Soldier are woefully underrepresented in Stucky fanfiction, and I also think it's not a pretty origin. There's a lot of bad that goes into making someone like Bucky into the Winter Soldier, and I wanted to unravel it.

That being said, this will actually have a pretty happy ending.

Enjoy!

This story is now being translated into Chinese [Here](#) and Korean [Began here](#) and [continued here](#)

And it is being podfic'd [Here](#) which still blow my mind.

And we have fan art [Here!](#)

Other notes:

I don't own any of these characters and have made absolutely no money off of this venture.

This fic deals with Dissociative Identity Disorder, but it is not a fully accurate depiction because Bucky's alters do not develop when he is a child and because of science fiction elements.

Thank you to all of the readers, some anonymous and some whom I know well, who have made suggestions to improve this story, in particular Ce, Ash, and didanon.

# Chapter 1

Sometimes when you stand on the ground and prepare to jump, you think about how it will feel to launch yourself into the air. You think about that split second when you'll be free and suspended. Then you jump, and it's over too quickly before you can register and relish that freedom. You're back on the ground.

As Bucky falls from the train, tumbling over and over (ground, sky, ground, sky, ground, sky) he thinks about that elusive feeling of suspension. Always chased and never caught. He's surrounded by air on every side now, and part of his brain tries to relax so that he can feel what it's like to fly.

Unfortunately, the rest of his brain thinks it has something to gain by kicking his legs and reaching for handholds even though there are none. There's nothing but the train tracks above and the gorge below.

Also, he's screaming, he thinks. Yeah, he's definitely screaming.

He can't even control the way he falls, just feet over head over feet, again and again, and then suddenly he sees an outcropping of ice-covered rocks reaching out of the mountain for him. He reaches back, but he's too far away.

He continues to fall, and the small part of his brain that knows what's happening to him (versus the panicking part of his brain and the part that's still looking for solutions and hand-holds) sees that the ground looks much closer than it did a second ago.

"Hail Mary, full of grace." He tries to force his screaming mouth into the shapes of the familiar words, but they garble and distort what he wants to say. It doesn't matter anyway; it's not like he's going to redeem himself in the last seconds (minutes? How long has it been since he fell off the train?) of his life. Not after all the blood he's spilled. He shifts his thoughts to what he actually wants on his lips as he dies.

"Steve!" he shrieks. Then everything goes black.

Bucky lifts his eyelids and sees white through the dark of his lashes. Every bone, every muscle, every drop of blood feels like it's burning. He closes his eyes.

Bucky lifts his eyelids and sees white through the dark of his lashes. His lashes are covered in ice. He feels frozen to the core, but it's quelled the burning. He's so cold; he feels like the very breath is frozen solid in his lungs. His arm hurts, despite the ice blanket. He closes his eyes.

Bucky lifts his eyelids and sees darkness. He blinks several times, his eyes dry and stiff and feeling like he's crying rivers of ice. It takes him a while to focus, and when he does, he sees stars above him.

He doesn't know where he is or what's happening to him.

“Ste?” he gasps, his throat raw and bone-dry. It focuses him. Steve. Where is Steve? Bucky has to get to Steve, and then Steve will take care of whatever needs to be fixed. Steve will carry Bucky back to Allied forces on his back if he has to – he’s practically done it before. He focuses his energies on sitting up, but his back feels like it’s been crushed, and his head isn’t much better. He tries to use his arms for leverage, and discovers that he can nudge the right one in the snow. The left one isn’t responding.

Slowly, he turns his neck, splitting pains shooting through his body, and sees something on top of his arm. It looks like there’s been a rockslide since Bucky’s fallen, and his whole body is covered in iced-over stones and slate. His left arm, in particular, is crushed underneath the weight of a huge boulder.

He tries to move it again, and he thinks he feels the bone scrape directly against rock. The sensation makes him choke, and he feels his throat open up and sputter vomit on his chin.

It’s warm.

Bucky closes his eyes and prays for death.

Bucky opens his eyes again when he feels his something pulling his hair. He sees a swarm of people dressed head-to-toe in black all around him, masks making it impossible to tell if they’re staring at him or looking around the bleak landscape.

He hears voices, not in any language he recognizes, but he’s not even able to follow the cadence of the conversation. He’s numb and splitting from the pain at the same time. He feels the pull at his hair again, and he realizes that he’s being lifted off the ground. His hair, which Steve’s been after him to trim for weeks now, is frozen to the tundra.

He moves his mouth, but his jaw doesn’t cooperate. He tries to talk, and he hears an undignified whine slide through his lips. The voices hush and then pick up again. As he wakes up more, he starts to interpret tone; these people are anxious. They’re all men. And none of them are happy.

The world in front of his vision changes and moves, and he only becomes aware that his body has been placed on some sort of platform several feet above the ground when the world stops moving and his view is different from before.

The platform starts to move, propelled by several black figures, and Bucky sees that the boulders and rocks and snow have been pushed aside, leaving a bloody outline of a human being on the white ground.

He also sees something blue and something light pink. It looks like a glove. He wonders what it could be.

The next time he wakes up, he’s so groggy and nauseous that he can’t move his head without setting everything spinning. He slips in and out of consciousness several times before the grogginess fades and he can stare at the ceiling for several seconds without wanting someone to put a bullet in his head.

The detail, ‘ceiling’ registers slowly, and then he remembers, ‘sky.’ There should be sky above him. He fell; he’s been at death’s door for...days? There should be no ceiling. Something is wrong.

He tries to push himself up again, but he can't. Craning his neck allows him to look down the expanse of his body and see that he is both naked and strapped to a platform with soft (but durable) gray bindings.

His breathing picks up as he starts to panic, and he hears a monitor at his left emit a high-pitched beeping noise.

Turning to look at the source of the beeping noise is difficult, but he manages. He turns his head, looks, and blinks because the images don't make sense.

He sees a clump of white bandages balled against his shoulder, no blood in sight. He remembers the pain and thinks that obviously there's supposed to be blood. His arm has to be bloody with how much it throbbed, even when the rest of his body shut down with systematic organ failure induced by freezing temperatures and.

Oh God.

Oh God, his arm isn't there.

Confused, scared, pained, cold, and unsure if he's dead or not, Bucky starts to scream again. He screams as the black figures file into the room, press buttons, shout at him in harsh syllables, and stick needles into his neck and arm and.

Oh God.

Oh God, his arm isn't there.

Like falling down the rabbit hole as the drugs in the syringes take effect, Bucky's vision narrows to a pinprick of light surrounded by dark, his teeth still stretched wide around a guttural scream.

Bucky doesn't open his eyes the next time he wakes up. He's more lucid this time, and he remembers slowly all of the previous times he's opened his eyes. He's never been prepared for what awaits him when he lifts his lids, so he takes time to prepare himself.

He's a dead man, even if he isn't actually dead yet. He doesn't question how he survived the fall any more than he's been questioning a lot of things lately.

Like why he never feels tired.

And why he barely feels pain, even when he's been nicked by a German's bullet.

And why he can slow his heartbeat at will and pull the trigger of his Johnson rifle in the calm between beats.

But he does know that he's dead, because Steve would be here if he had any hope of surviving whatever is happening to him.

He doesn't know what's happening to him; he's going to have to open his eyes for that. Opening his eyes, however, will force him to confront whether or not his arm is missing, whether or not the bandages on his shoulders cover a messy seam which covers an empty socket. He chooses not to know; to exist in this space between agonizing questions and more agonizing answers.

"I see you are awake, beautiful boy," a sibilant voice cutting harsh with ethnic consonants tells

him. The voice is seated at his right, and Bucky knows that it's time to face the next phase of his death.

He opens his eyes to his agonizing answers. A man is sitting next to him, smiling incongruously, and scribbling something down on a clipboard.

"I am Vasily Karpov, and I am so glad to see that you are awake." He finishes his note and clips the pen to his white jacket. "You were being very naughty there and refusing to open your eyes, kotyonok." He brings a cold, bloodless hand to Bucky's face and trails a sharp-nailed finger from his jaw to his temple.

"We have been waiting days to talk to you," he says with a smile, and this time, Bucky reads the cruelty and the poison in it. Stomach churning, he turns to his left. He examines the bandaged stump, the bandages now yellowed with iodine in places.

On his right, the man presses a finger into the hinge of his jaw and chuckles.

On his left, he's crippled.

The straps hold in down, and he can't get away from whatever is happening to him. Or, perhaps that's too passive and fatalistic. From whatever is *being done* to him.

His throat still raw from screaming, Bucky doesn't talk for over a week. He stays strapped to the platform, getting sores from the metal and the cloth of the straps. They feed him something that looks and tastes like thin broth from a spoon, and more than half the time, Karpov insists on feeding him personally. He thinks about refusing the broth, but it's so obvious that they can force him.

They use a bedpan when he has to relieve himself. They sponge him down periodically. They never give him clothes or let him cover up what should be just between him and God and a few loose-legged girls back in Brooklyn. Nor do they let him cover up the remainder of his arm.

The bandages are changed twice daily, and Bucky doesn't look at what lies underneath. When they finally stop bandaging it, simply covering it in a layer of putrid-smelling yellow iodine, he tries and fails to confront it.

"You heal fast, kotyonok. Still, we are lucky that we found you when we did." A smell of oranges washes over Bucky, and he sees the man eating fruit from the corner of his eye. He still refuses to acknowledge Karpov, which seems to delight the man.

"So beautiful," he says as he presses a nail into Bucky's chest. "Just like your movies," he adds wistfully. "What a shame to hide something so lovely behind the red, white, and blue oaf."

"Fuck you," are Bucky's first words in captivity. Not for the first time on this table, he worries about Steve. If Steve gives half as many damns about Bucky as Bucky gives about Steve (and he's never doubted that Steve does love him like a brother), then he'll be torn up by Bucky's death. He thinks about Steve mourning his mother, and how he'd looked like someone tore the sun right out of his universe, and his heart throbs with guilt.

While Bucky is glad to give his life for Steve, possibly even has, part of him would rather Steve goes first so Steve doesn't have to live with that pain. Even thinking about their roles being

reversed shatters Bucky.

He hopes that Steve is safe in a camp right now, Agent Carter on his lap and his stupid shield between him and the world. Planning to win the war. Gritting his teeth and bearing Bucky's loss.

Opening Bucky's pack and reading the goodbye letter to Steve that all the men have already pre-written to their parents or sweethearts.

It occurs to Bucky that if he is going to be alive for any length of time (he's exhausted himself waiting for the shot to ring out or the knife to enter his chest), he too should probably start mourning Steve. Broken, captured, and alone, it doesn't look like he's getting back to his punk.

"'Fuck you.' Do you have anything else of this nature you wish to express, kotyonok?" Karpov asks him. His fingers trail down Bucky's chest to a cold, pebbled nipple and squeezes. It hurts; he's never been hurt there before. "Because this is the last time you will speak this way to me. I assure you." He slaps the pained skin, and it humiliates more than it stings. "So please, the floor is yours."

Bucky finally looks at his arm. The yellowed skin is crisscrossed with thick, black stitching, and only part of the socket is intact. He doesn't know how much damage is from the boulders and how much damages is from the hacked surgery in this lab that feels millions of miles away from his unit and his sleeping bag and his CO. He doesn't know if the operation saved his life, or if it's going to end his life quicker.

The words spill out of him as he finally digests the idea that he's alive for the time being, and he's being held and treated by this sick fuck and an army of black, hooded men with objectives so far off Bucky's radar that he can't even begin to understand.

"Fuck you, you twisted, Ruskie son of a bitch," he says. The anger builds under his skin, and he relishes it; it's better than pain and sadness and bewilderment. "Where the fuck am I? What the hell are you doing to me? You'd better fucking let me go, or I'll kill all of you, even with one arm. I'll put a bullet in the brain of every cocksucking bastard in this godforsaken place!" he screams, throat throbbing, as he struggles against the straps with renewed effort.

"Don't hurt yourself, kotyonok," Karpov says with an oily smile. Bucky thrashes all the harder.

"And you'd better not fucking touch me again, you dirty, fucking pervert. Keep your hands away from me, or I'll fucking bite 'em off."

He feels more like himself than he's felt since he was with Steve. His accent roughs his syllables, and he laughs maniacally, letting the rage ride him and keep him in this beautiful, furious moment before he has to go back to dying.

"You're gonna fucking lose this war, and my boys are going to kill all you sorry sons of bitches. Hitler, Schmidt. Whoever the fuck you work for. No, seriously, who are you fucking working for, because you have Hydra goons, but you're no one I've heard of. And I've heard of all the big shots. You're small time, asshole, but my boys'll get you anyway."

This time Karpov's smile looks a bit strained.

"Let's just say that I'm contracted to work with Hydra. I worked for Zola, but now, I suppose, that your 'boys' have taken him, I work for myself."

"I've been tortured by Hydra before; I know all your shit. Do your worst. Or fucking kill me now. But don't keep me strapped to a fucking table getting bedsores and pissing into a bowl,"

Bucky yells.

Karpov stands to leave and brushes his fingers against the sweat breaking out on Bucky's forehead.

"Kotyonok, I don't use Hydra's methods, just their money. You may have survived Zola's plans for you, but I assure you, you've not yet encountered anything like Department X." He lowers his face and brushes a chaste kiss against Bucky's hairline, and Bucky slams his head backwards, hitting Karpov in the mouth. He cuts his head on Karpov's teeth, but he must have done some damage to the other man as well, if the way he's slapped full-handed with the force of the man's entire arm has anything to do with it.

The next time Bucky tries to mouth off, they bring in a device with wires and nodes that they place across his chest. Then they crank it on and electricity courses through his body, whiting out his vision and making him forget where he is for several minutes. When he figures it out, he opens his mouth to respond to Karpov asking him, "Is that all?" and a mouthful of blood and the tip of his tongue fall out.

It's not all. Every time Bucky speaks, the vitriol that pours out of his mouth is almost involuntary. They shock him; they beat him; they break the fingers in his hand. They lance him; they inject him; they burn his feet.

Bucky thinks he's been in this room, on this table for months. He wishes that he had a cyanide capsule stashed under a false tooth, because he'd be long gone by now. But the American army isn't fucked up (benevolent?) enough to give their soldiers these things, and Bucky doesn't even know if it would stop Karpov. He's reasonably sure that they've already brought him back from the dead once.

Alternative option: this is hell. It actually makes a lot of sense. He really would have thought that taking care of Steve counted for *something* though.

He hasn't worn clothes in months. He hasn't walked in months. His goddam arm stump is healed and useless, what information he knows about the Howling Commandos is long outdated, and he starts to think that maybe he should try cooperating with these people. If he's in hell, he has to give up some time; if he's still of this earth, then maybe he can find a way to die.

"What do I have to do to get off this table?" he asks Karpov the next time the man sits with him and feeds him. He obediently slurps the broth from the spoon, looking innocently up at the man and feeling his stomach churn in disgust.

"You must stop fighting me, kotyonok. Then I can start my work." He swipes a finger over the broth on Bucky's bottom lip, bringing it to his own lips and darting his tongue out to taste.

Bucky forces down his nausea and says, quietly, "I'm done fighting. I want to get up."

"A wise decision. Unfortunately, I must have proof. You've not been easy to subdue," Karpov says. He sounds like he doesn't mind at all. The sick fuck's probably been getting off on Bucky's torture.

"I'm done," Bucky promises again. And then, to show how sweet and agreeable he can be, he asks, "What does that word mean? The one that you call me. Kochy-"



“Kotyonok,” Karpov says just as sweetly. “It means kitten.” Bile rises in Bucky’s throat. Karpov puts the bowl of broth down and runs his hand down Bucky’s side, stopping only when he gets to the reinforced strap which pins Bucky’s hips to the bed.

Bucky shuts his eyes and thinks of Brooklyn.

When he’s finally unstrapped, fifteen Hydra goons are standing by with firearms pointed at various parts of his body. He understands why they think he’s going to try to run or kill them (he’s threatened to do both), but his muscles are already atrophying, and he can barely put weight on his legs. As it is, he has to lean on the table he’s become so intimately familiar with, and his legs feel like they’re being stabbed with thousands of tiny needles.

“Take the American to his cell,” Karpov instructs someone, and a black figure grabs Bucky’s arm and pulls him forward. Between the pricking feeling and the lack of an arm for balance, Bucky tips forward and falls to the ground, smacking his face on the tile and, probably, breaking his nose.

His face slides in the blood pooling from his nose. One of the Hydra goons kicks at his side, and another grabs him by the hair, which now falls into his eyes, and yanks him up. Another grabs him from behind and drags him, feel trailing through the blood and across rough concrete as Bucky’s head lolls forward to keep the blood from sliding down his throat and choking him. He catches sight of Karpov as he’s dragged from the room, and the man looks exuberant.

He wants to set fire to these people, this facility and everything in it (including himself) more than ever. But he keeps calm and pliant, determined that he’s not getting strapped to that table again. ‘What would Steve do?’ he asks himself for, conservatively, the thousandth time. Steve would be smarter than them. Steve would pretend to play along, learn their routines, and escape. So that’s what Bucky will do.

Well, actually, Steve wouldn’t have allowed himself to be strapped to the table in the first place, and would have busted out of here through the use of force by now. But Bucky isn’t Steve. Bucky is nothing like Steve, so he’s along for the torture and the degradation.

He hopes that Steve is safe and warm right now. Well-fed. Maybe even well-loved by Agent Carter. It’s been a few months; that’s more than enough time for even Steve to get in her skirt. He wants Steve to enjoy the things that aren’t for him anymore.

His ‘cell’ is four feet by six feet. It’s six feet high, which means that Bucky’s hair scrapes the ceiling as he paces back and forth in the small walking area not occupied by the pallet that’s supposed to serve as his bed.

He’s had enough lying down. He sleeps sitting up, propped in the corner. He wedges the stump of his shoulder into the right angle where the walls meet, because that feels like the most vulnerable part of his body.

When he’s not thinking about Steve or wishing he were dead, he tries to shed some levity on the arm situation. While it was difficult to come to terms with, he knows that it’s not the worst thing going for him at the moment, and he never expects to make it back to a normal life where missing an arm will be an impediment.

“Good job losing your left arm, dumbass,” he mutters to himself. “Now you’ll have to finally learn

to write with your right hand like the nuns wanted you to.” It’s funny, because he won’t write anything ever again.

“The only thing you’ve ever been good at is shooting, and you can’t shoot a rifle with one hand. Excellent career planning.” It’s funny, because he’ll never hold a gun again.

“Nice job-” And then he usually breaks down.

He investigates the cell for screws or nails. Somehow, the walls are a solid sheet of metal without any seams, which he knows from feeling his way over every inch. The pallet he sleeps on doesn’t have any zippers or buttons. His best bet, he thinks, is the single fluorescent light bulb which can only be operated from outside the cell.

He smashes it one night when he doesn’t hear any guards in the hallway outside, and grabs the biggest piece of glass that he can find in the dark with his fingers trailing through the mess and incurring tiny slices. He grabs the sliver of glass, raises it to his throat, and yanks it backwards.

Blood spills onto his hand and down his throat. He gasps wetly and brings the glass back for another cut, but it falls out of his slippery hands and he can’t recover it in the dark. Desperate, he grabs a handful of shards from the floor and grounds them into the wound as the door flies open, hitting his foot, and Hydra goons pour in.

After the surgery to repair his neck and throat (and hadn’t the glass shards been a fun complication), Bucky spends another three months strapped to the table in the lab. He knows that it’s three months, because Karpov keeps a count on the blackboard that Bucky doesn’t remember being there last time. It must be at least six months since he’s fallen. When Karpov slides his hands through Bucky’s hair, now nearly grown to his chin, he pretends that it’s Steve’s hand.

“You know what you need to do to prove I can let you off this bench,” Karpov tells him. Bucky blinks slowly, no energy to care left in him. He opens his mouth and Karpov’s fingers flutter at the fastenings of his pants. Bucky absently misses pants.

“Bite me, and I will make your life thus far with us feel like a stroll in the garden,” Karpov mutters, seemingly checking over his shoulder to make sure that they’re alone.

He keeps his mouth open as Karpov pushes in, knowing that it was always going to come to this. He chokes on the taste and the feeling of something cutting off his airways, but he doesn’t fight. He wants to move again. He’s actually going to be good this time; just let him pace in his cell.

This time, his cell is made of metal bars. He doesn’t try to break them; knows that they’re probably like the reinforced straps. The light from the guard station a few feet away trickles in, but Bucky doesn’t have his own light. He spends most of his days standing and propping his weight against the bars, falling asleep and waking up later with harsh red marks where the bars cut into his armpit.

He doesn’t know what they want from him. He’s offered information, all outdated of course, but they don’t seem to care. He wondered for a time if he was being held for ransom of some sort; trying to get Zola or something important back in exchange for Sergeant Barnes, which the United States would never agree to anyway. But they really don’t seem to have a plan for him besides using him as their personal punching bag and pincushion, and trying to drive him insane with

loneliness and, well, boredom.

“I’ll die of boredom, Ma,” he used to say dramatically to his mother. She’d make him cross himself and then give him a list of chores. It was real easy to find something to do when chores were at stake – he’d go down to the docks and watch the men, or he’d find some boys in the neighborhood and play jacks, or he’d go over to Steve’s and they’d make up stories taking turns about which one of them could be the hero.

The boredom of his youth feels continents away from this boredom. ‘Boredom’ isn’t even an appropriate word for it. Bucky’s days are empty. Apart from Karpov, no one talks to him. He sits or stands for fourteen hours without anyone to talk to, any books to read, or anything but blank walls and blank men to look at. The other ten hours, he sleeps restlessly, dreaming about ice and blood and Steve in his place.

The short, bitter conversations with Karpov are actually a godsend, even though he knows that Karpov wants him to think that. Usually, Karpov restricts himself to talking about how Bucky’s almost ready for the “next phase” and caressing him inappropriately before leaving. Occasionally, he dismisses the guards and makes Bucky kneel and take him in his mouth through the bars.

“Can I have some clothes?” Bucky asks for the hundredth time after he’s been in his new cell for several weeks. Karpov pretends to think about it as he tugs on a lock of Bucky’s hair. It’s going to be as long as a dame’s soon.

“You’re going to have to prove that you’re very good, kotyonok,” he tells him. Bucky gapes at him, shocked that he’s actually gotten somewhere, before sinking to the ground. “No, no. Not that. Come with me.”

He takes Bucky to the lab and makes him lie down on the hated bench. This time, though, he’s on his stomach.

“I won’t strap you down,” Karpov says in what he likely thinks is a reassuring voice. “Arch your back for me, beautiful boy. There you go. Perfect.” Bucky knows what’s going to happen and he hides his face in the crook of his elbow, willing himself to go elsewhere. He’s had a lot of time in his own head, and he’s mostly effective at putting up walls and going someplace less bleak when he’s being electrocuted or beaten. He’s even starting to lose track of time, slipping from one miserable day to the next. It works out.

When he raises his head, he thinks that only seconds have passed. But his ass burns, and his back is cramped, and Karpov is staring down at him with a puzzled look on his face.

“I was not aware that you spoke German,” he tells Bucky. Bucky squints at him in confusion. He knows a little German from being a German POW twice now, as well as some ‘handy phrases’ Steve had insisted the Commandos learn before going behind enemy lines. He knows he wasn’t speaking it though; he didn’t say anything while Karpov climbed on top of him.

He ducks his head again, unsure if Karpov is done with him. His brain tries to conjure up an image of Steve, still his light in dark places, but he squashes it quickly. He doesn’t want to associate a hair of this with Steve. Steve would be disgusted with him if he found out.

“You can get up now,” Karpov says, still sounding bemused. Bucky pushes himself into a crouching position with his arm, and then swings his legs off the side of the table.

“Pants,” he says imploringly. Karpov reaches forward and briefly takes ahold of Bucky’s completely limp dick, looking at it sadly before squeezing and letting go.

“Such a shame to cover this up, but I am a man of my word,” he says with regained confidence. “Besides,” he says as he puts Bucky back into his cell. “You’ve lost all your muscle tone.” He pinches at the skin over Bucky’s flat and undefined stomach wistfully, and then walks away.

There’s blood in the bucket when Bucky relieves himself that night. It doesn’t matter; he gets soft black pants and a black cotton shirt the next day.

The next week, he’s strapped into a device that looks like one of the usual electricity machines. They enjoy seeing how many volts, and for how long, he can take before he screams, blacks out, or both.

(If there’s anything that Bucky’s learned from Hydra, it’s that unconsciousness and screaming are not mutually exclusive).

He gets a rubber grip to bite down on like normal; after losing part of his tongue, it’s standard procedure. Unlike normal, this machine tips him backwards and presses against his head. He wonders where the nodes and wires are.

“It’s okay, kotyonok,” Karpov tells him. He runs his thumb over the rubber between Bucky’s teeth, caressing both his lips and the torture aid. One of the goons in black twitches away from the scene, and Bucky wonders what facial expressions they make underneath the masks when Karpov touches him like this.

“Just relax. Make your mind amenable. It’s starting.”

What’s starting?, Bucky wants to ask. He keeps quiet. The Hydra goons talk to each other in German and Bucky can’t understand them, but he thinks they’re talking technical babble.

He sees them flip the switch as the electricity courses through his head, stunning and disorienting him.

Steve. What’s going.

He opens his eyes, panting heavily, and sees Karpov staring at him. Well, they’re all staring at him, but Karpov’s is the only face he can see.

One of the Hydra goons gets in his face and yells at him in German. Still having trouble focusing, Bucky squints at the man and shakes his head.

“Say something in German,” Karpov orders him. Bucky gapes, feeling drool slip from the corner of his mouth as one goon pulls the rubber away.

“Ich spreche nicht Deutsch,” he says pathetically. He’s not trying to be a smartass by saying he doesn’t speak German in German; it’s just one of the few phrases he can dig up with his brain feeling so crispy. He also knows that he’s badly butchered the words. Steve’s the linguist between the two of them.

The goons continue to shout at him, and he shakes his head, trying to get rid of the floating, tingling feeling. He actually isn’t in pain, which is unusual for a bout of electrocute-the-American.

They strap him into the machine the next day. Again, it doesn’t hurt, and he isn’t aware of more than the first few seconds of voltage to his brain. He doesn’t know what they’re trying to do to

him, but the focus on his brain is suspicious. They've moved on from simply wanting to hurt him and control him, and now they're trying to hack into him somehow.

They strap him into the machine the next day. This time, one of the goons sets up an audio recording device and aims it at him.

He sees the switch flick on, and then his vision clears and the electricity is off. They turn off the recording device.

Bucky leans his head against the machine, panting for some reason, as they hit buttons. A minute later, his own voice is played back for him.

“Schalten sie es aus!” his voice yells. Something icy slides down his spine. “Ich werde ihnen sagen, was sie wissen wollen! Stoppen sie das! Das!”

That night, the goons are especially quiet as they move around his cell. They think he can eavesdrop, he realizes, but the honest truth is that he understands maybe one word in twenty. And that's even after spending seven...eight...God knows how many months trapped here. It might even be a year.

It doesn't explain what had happened on that recording device. What are they doing to him, he wonders, that *that* came out of him? The electricity machine does something strange to him, makes him lose track of time and sensation, but it's not wholly different from his ability to do that on his own when he's screaming in the wake of a nightmare and they plunge his head under water to shut him up. He can make himself go away for that, too.

To his knowledge, he's never started speaking in tongues before. But it happens, right? Pentecost and all that?

They're trying to teach him German. He doesn't quite follow the logic. Are they trying to *make* him German? Make him work for Schmidt and Hitler and Hydra? Because that's not happening; Steve will kill him first, and he's grateful for it.

For the first time, he wonders if the war is still going on. It's been a while, and things were looking good for the Allied forces when he fell.

Maybe they've won.

Maybe they've lost.

Except, he realizes when a goon grabs his wrist dangling from the bars of the cell and wrenches his arm back inside, they sounded confused. Karpov, especially, was confused. Is the language thing some sort of unforeseen *side effect*?

And why would Karpov want to make him German? Karpov is clearly Russian, and he's also clearly not beloved among the Hydra goons. Is he trying to make Bucky Russian? The Russians are on the Allied side, not that that means anything when there's clearly some partnership between the two still existing in Hydra.

The goon thrusts a piece of bread through the bars and drops it; it lands face-down on the ground, sticking with the gluey protein paste it's spread with. He picks it up and eats it, and then ignores their jeering when he wipes up the remaining protein goop with his finger and eats that too.

He searches his mind for the German words to tell them off. He comes up with nothing.

“What are you trying to do to me?” Bucky asks the next time he’s strapped into the machine. Karpov seems neither pleased nor disappointed with the project thus far, though very, very curious.

“That’s not a question for you to ask,” Karpov responds. He adjusts the plate that goes over Bucky’s forehead.

“I’m not going to fight for you. Whatever you’re doing, you send me out into the fight, and Captain America will take me down,” he says confidently.

Karpov’s lips twitch.

“Captain America, still? He died nine months ago, kotyonok.” Bucky shudders and looks up at Karpov with wide eyes. He positively beams back. “I would not lie to you. He is dead. I suppose I have not kept you up with current events. And, incidentally, you have won the war. Congratulations; not that it has any matter on what we do here.”

Bucky feels his chest constrict. Steve can’t be dead. If the war is over, Steve has to be back home with Agent Carter. Nine months...that’s enough time for a baby. Steve has to be in the States with Carter and a baby on the way, ink still drying on the marriage license. If that’s true, then Bucky died for all the right reasons.

If it’s not...

“No,” he growls. The feral note in his voice disguises the brokenness. “No. He’s not dead. He’s unkillable.”

“We certainly wondered after we found you still alive. And Zola didn’t even come close to Erskine’s work. But, in fact, he is not match for a...what was it, a plane crash?”

Hot tears prick the corner of Bucky’s eyes.

“No,” he continues to insist. Karpov sighs.

“Go get the telegram,” he tells a goon. The black figure leaves and comes back with a brittle half-sheet of paper. Karpov holds it in front of Bucky and his eyes blur the words before he focuses and remembers how to read them.

**“CAPTAIN AMERICA DEAD IN ATLANTIC STOP SCHMIDT KILLED PLANE DOWN  
NUKES FAILED STOP CONTINUE EFFORTS TO BRAINWASH SERUM RECIPIENT  
THREE STOP”**

“This is a lie,” Bucky says through gritted teeth. “This is a fucking bullshit lie cooked up by-”

One of the goons steps forward with a blunt cane, not unlike a police man’s nightstick, and clubs Bucky upside the head. He can’t move away because he’s already strapped in.

“NO,” he screams. The man steps forward again and hits Bucky between the legs.

“STEVE.”

“Quiet him down,” Karpov tells the man. He winds up and smashes it into Bucky’s chest and lungs, and he feels like his sternum is shattering.

Then he wakes up in his cell. His chest is fine. He's wearing a different shirt. And a Hydra goon is standing at his cell and speaking to him in German.

The black figure goes away as Bucky looks around and tries to figure out how he got here, and a minute later, Karpov comes to the cell.

"Who are you?" he asks. Bucky blinks.

"I've been your prisoner for nine months," he says slowly. Is this a trick?

"The American is back," Karpov calls behind him.

Apparently, Karpov and the goons are curious enough to want Bucky's thoughts on the matter. They sit him down on a stool in a lab where he's never been, and set up a projector.

They show him footage of himself curled into a ball in his cell, which Bucky only does when he's sleeping. The Bucky in the footage is awake, though.

"Was ist dein Name?" one of the goons asks him on the reel.

"Mein Name ist Axel," movie-Bucky replies.

Bucky thinks he can translate those phrases; for the other ten minutes of dialogue, however, he's lost. He sees himself and hears himself, but he has no idea what's coming out of his mouth in the footage even though he logically knows that he said those things.

"What do you think?" Karpov asks him when they finish the viewing. Bucky shrugs.

"You're the one messing with my head."

"You are not familiar with Axel?"

"Axel?" Bucky repeats. He thinks he knows the answer to his next question, but, "Who is Axel?"

"That was Axel," Karpov says pointing to the projection screen. "Axel has been visiting with us for a week. Ever since Barnes learned that his friend was dead." Bucky tries to get up, and one of the goons punches him in the stomach. He doesn't want to talk or think about this. He needs time to grieve. Put him back in the cell.

"But you say Axel is not known to you?" Karpov inquires, rubbing his chin.

"I don't know any Axels," Bucky responds.

Karpov stands up and waves his hand to indicate that Bucky can go back.

"Then we have found something very interesting. It isn't what we hoped, perhaps. But it may still prove fruitful."

It's hard to tell when he loses time and the thing happens. He refuses to believe he's actually becoming a different person in that time. But he starts to test it. He makes marks on his body with his nails and teeth, and even though he heals very quickly, they sometimes disappear outright, and he knows that he's lost some time.

Whenever he's strapped in the chair, he wakes up somewhere else. Whenever Karpov pushes him to his knees or takes him somewhere away from the goons, he wakes up without remembering the end of it.

If there really is an Axel, he's helping Bucky out. He can't even hate the fact that he's apparently sharing...what? A body? A brain?

Whatever is happening, Axel shows up more and more during events that Bucky would rather not live through. He's put up with them for so long, and now, finally, a tiny form of salvation has come. He gets to sleep through his torture and rape, and wake up mostly healed.

He feels bad for Axel though. If Axel is actually, and this is a weird thing to think, a sentient personality, then Bucky knows exactly how he feels.

The first time that Bucky questions not Axel's existence, but his motivations, is when Karpov pushes him against the tiled wall of the room where they hose him down periodically. He parts the globes of Bucky's ass and rubs a wet finger against his hole.

Bucky shuts his eyes and tries to call up Axel. Perhaps because he's consciously trying to black out, it doesn't work. His breath leaves him sharply as Karpov pushes inside.

"Unclench, kotyonok," he commands gently.

"Shit," Bucky says to release some of the tension. Karpov's hands freeze on him.

"Barnes. Interesting. I was expecting Axel."

"Maybe Axel is tired of being molested," Bucky bites out because he's thrown off-balance by the pain and the disgust. Karpov threads his fingers through Bucky's long hair and uses the grip to slam Bucky's head into the tile.

"Axel is much better at this than you are," Karpov tells him like he thinks Bucky will actually care. "He likes it."

Without having met the guy, Bucky is almost positive that Axel doesn't like this. After all, they share a brain and a body in some form or another. They have to have some things in common, and the fact that being violated by Karpov is a degrading, vile thing seems like it would be a universal bad.

What is Axel doing? Bucky wishes, for the first time, that they could communicate. In order to do that, however, he probably has to understand what Axel is first.

Axel certainly has more freedoms than Bucky. He starts waking up outside his cell. He's sitting at a table with some Hydra goons and eating actual meat. He's in a shower – a real shower – and the water is warm. He's sitting on a chair that's suddenly appeared in the cell.

It's obvious that everyone likes Axel better than Bucky. Karpov likes his responsiveness, as he describes to Bucky in great detail; the Hydra goons like that he's German and apparently a model prisoner.

He never back talks (which Bucky still can't help sometimes).

He combs his hair with his fingers and makes an effort to look like a clean person (which Bucky



doesn't bother with).

He jokes and tells stories and gambles with the Hydra goons (which Bucky obviously doesn't do, the extent of their relationship being a contest to see who can knock him out the most).

Bucky gets majorly depressed around the one-year point in his captivity. Apart from still being a prisoner and not being dead yet, he thinks he's sharing his body with a Hydra enthusiast.

Bucky wakes up one day and he's outside. Wind is blowing on his face.

He thinks he's still in the cell at first, but then he realizes that the metal bars around him belong to a fire escape.

He sees stars above like the last time he was outside.

He bolts upright and looks around. He doesn't have any weapons or any bags. Checking his pockets, he finds that they're full of bread. There's a bottle of water on the fire escape with him, half-empty, along with a light gray shirt.

He looks down at his chest and discovers that he's wearing a dark gray shirt. He's never had more than two shirts at a time throughout his captivity. Something catches his eye on the shirt, and he prods at it to see that it's red.

After he takes a gulp of water, he un-wads the shirt and a bloody nail falls out of the folds.

"We escaped," is written in large, messy lines on the shirt's front. The message is written in blood.

He feels a faint sting at his ankle, and lifts the cuff of his pants to see a very recent scab.

Axel's written the message in their own blood. It's ingenious. But what is he thinking; Axel fucking *escaped*. Bucky's tried, of course, but he's never come close. Axel did it. Fuck that model prisoner bullshit, Bucky laughs hysterically, Axel got them *out*.

He has no clue where he is, so he jumps off the fire escape and takes the bloodied shirt and the nearly-empty bottle with him. He walks around the dimly-lit streets and sees signs in what he thinks is Russian. Unfortunately, neither he nor the other person living in his body are fluent in Russian, he's guessing.

He heads in the direction that he thinks the train station is, and he feels exhausted already. Axel probably hadn't been asleep long before Bucky resurfaced. Damn, he wants to know how they got out.

Actually, he has a lot of very pertinent questions. Are they running to Russia or from Russia? Where have they been for the past year? What was Axel's plan after curling up on the fire escape?

Bucky nibbles on a crust of bread as he finds the train station. Of course, they don't have any money, so he waits in the dark for a slow-moving train to pass his hiding spot and then he jumps and grabs for the ladder attached to a car.

He travels for hours, the wind cold against his face and snow drifting from the sky for a few minutes before stopping and then starting over again. He's in a thin shirt and thin pants, but he

barely feels the chill.

He knows that traveling for hours in Russia doesn't get you very far on the map, but he's anxious to try the first bigger city they barrel through. He jumps off the car, getting a brief flash of déjà vu about the last time he'd fallen off a train, and hits the ground at a run.

He has no idea how close he is to Hydra, or how far away. But in a bigger city, hopefully, there will be ways to earn money, and that will give him a way to get back to America.

Back to America. It doesn't seem real. For the first time in a while, he wonders if he's dead. The idea that purgatory might be clinging to a moving train in the Russian winter doesn't seem that far-fetched.

In this scenario, he knows exactly where and what heaven is. Heaven is an apartment, or, no Steve has Army money now. Heaven is a house in Brooklyn with Steve and Agent Carter and there's no way they don't have at least one baby by now. And Bucky knows that Steve won't mind if he stays there for a while to shake off the year of hell. Steve might even have a guest room with Bucky's name on it.

"Steve's dead," he reminds himself sadly before he can spiral out too far. "Steve's not in Brooklyn. He's in the fucking ocean because you weren't there to watch him."

It's nice to think of his little Heaven all the same. If they're both dead, what's to stop it from coming true?

Bucky picks pockets, which is a shitty thing to do, but he's a hoodrat from Brooklyn deep down and of course he knows the technique. Unfortunately, no one's wallet or purse has much money in it. Bucky's knowledge of Russian isn't vast, but he'd make an educated guess to say that their economy sort of blows right now.

He scrapes enough cash together to buy more food (which is even harder to steal and more preciously guarded), shoes, and a train ticket to Krakow, which he knows is in Poland.

Sitting on the train, barely anyone gives him a second look despite the fact that he's still not dressed weather-appropriately and has exactly one arm. Everyone seems so beaten-down and concerned with their own problems that he's not attracting any suspicious glances.

Bucky knows that he's going to have to sleep eventually, but he'd prefer to be in Poland before he chances it. The adrenaline's been riding him hard for hundreds of miles and multiple days, and he pushes himself to stay focused.

The train slows down when they get to the border of Poland, and people around Bucky start stirring and mumbling. He's not sure what the political situation is, but if he's going to be asked for some sort of paperwork or identification, then it's time for him to disappear.

He gets out of his seat and heads for the lavatory when lights on the train flicker and then cut out. The passengers collectively gasp, and some children start crying. Bucky's always had good instincts, and right now, his instincts are telling him to get the hell out of there.

Abandoning the lavatory plan, he makes for the first window he finds and fumbles with it in the dark. It doesn't help that the sky outside is also pitch black.

He decides, fuck it, and pulls his fist back to punch through the glass. Someone behind him grabs

his arm, and he feels the prick of a needle against the back of his neck.

“Sie haben uns sehr viel Mühe gemacht,” someone says as Bucky’s eyes roll into his head and he collapses forward, breaking the window anyway.

He wakes up. He’s strapped to the table.

Apparently purgatory was just a fever dream.

“I am very cross with you, kotyonok,” Karpov tells him from the corner of the room. “This is not acceptable.”

Bucky opens his mouth to retort, and then catches himself. He thinks of Axel’s cleverness in pretending to follow the rules and kissing up to the goons. Bucky can’t stomach the same routine, but it inspires him nonetheless.

“What happened?” he asks. Karpov approaches him and frowns. “Did he do something?”

Karpov opens and closes his mouth several times. He seems to scrutinize Bucky closely.

“You are telling me it was all Axel?” he asks.

‘Sorry, man,’ Bucky thinks to himself. ‘I’ll go next. Sorry for getting you in trouble.’ Then he wonders if Axel can actually hear him. He can’t hear Axel; how does this work?

Because the escape that Bucky truly did not mastermind, as much as he ran with it once he got his head in the game, has convinced him that Axel is real and crafty and something that isn’t going away. He’s something that Bucky can use. They can become allies, because they both want the same thing.

To get out.

“What was Axel?” he asks, letting the grogginess from the drugs show in his voice.

“The fact that we found you on the border of Poland,” Karpov says through clenched teeth. Bucky lets his face show surprise.

“Uh, not me. I guess he was trying to get to Germany. Cause he’s, I guess German, right? As much as someone who lives in an American’s body can be.” He stops himself from rambling before he gives it away.

“Of the two of you, you are the one I would expect to attempt an escape,” Karpov says. Bucky’s bitter laugh is real.

“Where would I go?” he asks. It seems to get through to Karpov.

“Yes, where would you go?” he asks meanly. He chuckles. “Well, we will have to watch Herr Axel more closely. You may go back to your cell,” he says as he snaps his fingers and two Hydra goons come forward to unstrap him.

“Can I have some paper?” Bucky asks as he swings his feet to the floor.

“Why?” Karpov sounds bored, probably already thinking of ways to make Axel scream.

“I want to write to Axel,” Bucky says, remembering the note on the shirt. While he was clinging to the train, he realized that it means Axel can speak English.

“No,” Karpov dismisses him.

“You’ll obviously be able to read them; they’ll be in plain sight. I just,” Bucky hesitates. “I need to find out who’s in my head.”

After studying him for several moments, Karpov nods. “Interesting. I had not considered that. I suppose you may write to him with supervision.”

Whatever weird science project this is turning into for his jailer, Bucky doesn’t care. He needs to learn about Axel. Their cooperation is likely the only chance they have of getting out of here. And now that he’s had a taste, he wants to get out of here. He’s ready to risk his life again for the chance.

The Hydra goons bring a single sheet of paper and a crayon to his cell that night. They titter as they hand the materials over, and Bucky ignores them. He sharpens the red crayon using his teeth, getting wax mixed in with whatever else is trapped between his teeth.

He spits out a gob of waxy saliva, and it looks like blood.

He takes his time thinking about what to write, and when he finally decides, he picks up the crayon in his right hand.

Shit; the mechanics of this are already screwing him over. He can’t write with his right hand, especially after going more than a year without writing a single thing. The thickness and slipperiness of the crayon itself further complicates his task.

‘Axel,’ he painstakingly writes. ‘This is Bucky. Heard you tried to escape. Sorry it didn’t work. Hope your English is good.’

It feels like he’s sending a telegram, but he can’t bother with flowery language or even subjects in some of his sentences.

He sleeps and wakes up unchanged twice, and on the third time, Axel slips back. When Bucky floats to the top again, he sees that Axel has written a message back.

Surprisingly, Axel appears to be right-handed, and doesn’t scribble like a child. Bucky flushes.

‘Bucky,’ the words say. ‘I speak English. Sorry for the escape – did not mean to get you in any trouble. Do you know what is happening to us?’

Bucky’s heart races. He turns the paper over to the back, because he can’t fit his scrawl into the bottom of the paper.

‘I got captured a year ago. Prisoner of war. Being kept here and tortured.’ He sorts his thoughts out and then continues. ‘Karpov trying to brainwash me I think. Created you instead. Sorry for all.’ He underlines ‘all’ several times, trying to convey how apologetic it is that Axel has to live this life alongside Bucky.

Sometime later, there’s more writing on the paper. He notices that whenever he loses time now, he wakes up with bruising and scabs. Apparently Axel isn’t the favorite anymore

‘Karpov told me. Think they were trying to make you a weapon. That helped make me, but not the only thing. Ask Karpov about split personality. Tut mir Leid für deinen Schmerz.’

Bucky spends nearly a week convincing one of the Hydra goons to translate Axel’s message to him.

“It says, ‘I am sorry for your suffering,’” the goon tells him. Bucky rubs his fingers over the words and thinks that he finally has someone else to live for again.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Basically, I've temporarily abandoned my Big Bang fic because I want to get Bucky through this and back to Steve! Thank you for the encouragement as I write like a mad woman.

The title, which will soon make sense, is the (Anglicized) Russian word for "four." I was going to use Cyrillic lettering, but there are already some fics with Cyrillic titles, and I didn't want any confusion.

It is 1948, and something is happening around Bucky. The Hydra goons are rushing around and pulling equipment away from the walls, speaking in agitated tones and completely ignoring Bucky in his cage. Which is more than fine with him.

“Sollen wir ihm die Haare schneiden?” one of them calls to the group.

“You’re not fucking cutting my hair,” Bucky calls back from where he’s sprawled on the floor. Axel’s been teaching him more German lately, and it’s been helpful in this prison where German is the primary language spoken. It’s not that difficult, seeing how the language is already trapped deep inside Bucky’s head. His subconscious was able to learn it just through listening.

“Yes, cut his hair,” Karpov orders as he rushes into the room with a file folder and hands it to the goon with the paper shredder.

Something is happening around Bucky. The goons are in a tizzy about something, and it’s interrupting Bucky’s plan to lie on the floor and play chess with Axel.

He decides that it doesn’t concern him until it does, so he looks back at the flimsy cardboard chess board and plastic pieces that Karpov brought him so he could practice slipping between Axel and Bucky. As much as he hates giving Karpov the satisfaction, he does want to learn.

He’s won 111 games to Axel’s 236 so far. And he’s nearly in place to win this game, if the nonsense going on in the labs doesn’t interrupt.

After he makes his move (knight up two, over one), he closes his eyes and searches for that calm, meditative feeling that pulls him under. Thirteen minutes later, according to the clock on the wall outside his cell that Karpov put there for this purpose, his head clears and he opens his eyes.

Axel’s moved his own queen out of the way, and there’s a scrap of paper with a message in green crayon sitting in Bucky’s hand.

‘Haircut? I wouldn’t mind,’ it says. Bucky reaches over his shoulder to grab the end of his hair and pull it toward his face for inspection. He remembers girls back in Brooklyn talking about split ends, and damn, he’s got them bad. His hair falls well into the middle of his back now, and one of the goons gave him an elastic when they got tired of how creepy he looked staring at them from behind a wall of hair.

But he doesn’t care how damaged or greasy his hair gets; it’s the only thing that helps him track

how long he's been here. His body doesn't seem to be aging or changing, at least to his knowledge, and he bites his own finger-and-toenails so they have no excuse to come at him with clippers. His hair is how he roughly knows it's 1948.

But one of the goons approaches the cell with scissors before too long, and Bucky sighs, apparently having no choice in the matter. How shocking.

The goon unlocks the cage and steps inside, kicking the chess board and sending all the pieces flying. Bucky's instantly on his feet, baring his teeth and yelling all the German insults he knows, and the man grabs his arm and jabs the sharp end of the scissors into his shoulder. He yelps, and the man pushes him. He grabs Bucky's loose ponytail and cuts directly above the elastic. A wave of limp hair falls into his face, roughly chin-length, and then the man is gone. The ponytail is a flaccid, pathetic thing on the ground, still in its elastic.

He sinks to the ground and sits with his legs folded, fuming. Grabbing the paper and crayon, he flips it over to the blank side and writes, 'Haircut not optional. Goon ruined the game – sorry.'

Then they come at him with needles. They haven't used drugs to put him under in a while. He's almost a little excited at what could possibly be in store for him next. It's 1948, and he's been sitting in a cage for nearly four years. The most painful death is welcome, as long as it breaks the monotony.

When Bucky wakes up, he's in a different room in the facility. He's never been in this room before; the walls and ceilings are red instead of the accustomed gray.

He's alone and lying on a table. He isn't strapped down, though. As soon as his head clears more from the drugs, he swings his feet to the ground and stands shakily. His interest in the new room crowds out his sense of self-preservation, and though he knows that Axel would tell him to stay put, he creeps along a counter to the first door he finds.

He pushes it open and discovers a group of men and women wearing white lab coats. It catches him off guard that their faces aren't covered – Apart from his most successful escape attempt on the Russian train, Bucky hasn't seen anyone's face besides Karpov's in years.

The first man to see him says something quickly in Russian, and then another man points a gun at him.

'Yes,' he thinks excitedly as the man's finger on the trigger practically moves in slow motion before his eyes. Finally.

Instead of putting a bullet in his chest, the gun shoots wires at Bucky, and a second later, he's hit with an electric current. He tries to fall to his knees, but one slips, and he ends up falling forward and crashing onto the stump of his shoulder. It throbs, and he blacks out.

When Bucky wakes up, he's sitting in a chair. His hand is secured to the arm with cuffs that must be made out of the same stuff as Steve's shield for all the good his struggle is doing him. As he squirms in the chair and tries to focus, he becomes aware that a man is standing in front of him, peering into his eyes with a flashlight.

“Who are you?” the man asks, stepping back and leaving Bucky seeing spots.

“Who are you?” Bucky fires back. He’s never seen the man before, and Karpov is nowhere in sight. It raises his hackles to be someone else’s prisoner.

“I am your new owner, Alexander Lukin,” the man tells him. His manner is brisk, and he doesn’t have Karpov’s oiliness in his voice. He’s looking at Bucky curiously without trying to fake kindness. There’s hunger in his gaze, but it’s different from Karpov’s.

“Sergeant James Barnes, 32557, of the 107<sup>th</sup> and the Howling Commandos,” he tells the man. That gets him a cold laugh.

“Not anymore, I think. It is good to meet you, Barnes,” he says as he moves forward and peers into Bucky’s eyes again. He smells like lighter fluid. “I have been having a fascinating conversation with Axel for some time now. He deeply regrets the fact that you felt the need to explore upon waking.”

Of course he did, Bucky thinks. Axel is a fantastic prisoner, until he’s slipping through your fingers. Bucky and Axel have theorized that their mind called up Axel to be passive in ways that Bucky never could be.

Karpov and the Hydra goons caught on eventually, and kept a much closer eye on Axel and his communications with Bucky. Bucky doesn’t know if his new ‘owner,’ whoever the fuck he is, knows that about Axel.

He sincerely hopes not.

“Just trying to find out where I was. Why am I in here?” he inquires. The flashlight in his eyes is practically blinding him.

“Where do you think you are, Barnes?” Lukin asks him. Bucky blinks not understanding the question. “Do you think you are back at Karpov’s second-rate facility?”

“I’m *out*?” he blurts. Lukin laughs coldly again. Bucky’s wanted to get out of those labs and that cage for years; is it possible that he actually left while he was unconscious? It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Yes, you are in my facility now. Karpov has had you long enough without results; you’ve been remanded to my care.”

“Where am I?” Bucky demands.

“Open your mouth,” Lukin tells him. Bucky does so automatically, mind already preparing to go blank, but Lukin simply shines the flashlight in. “Your teeth are rotted. This is vile. Do they cause you any pain?”

“Where am I?” Bucky asks again. Yes his teeth are rotted and painful; that’s hardly important.

“Very far away from where you were. Though still in Russia,” Lukin adds.

“Where was I?”

“Right outside Moscow. The idiot.” Bucky’s heart races. All this time, he’d been right outside Moscow. There’s a US embassy in Moscow, isn’t there? And plenty of people to hide among. And transportation.



“Rest assured, we are far away from the Germans now.” Bucky frowns.

“You-you’re not with Hydra?”

“Goodness no. We are done with Hydra. You’ve been our property all along, but you are now rightly in Department X.” He clicks the flashlight off and walks away.

“Someone will be in to pull your teeth, Mr. Barnes,” he says over his shoulder.

“Wait, which teeth?” Bucky calls.

“All your teeth,” is the answer.

“You gotta give me paper, come on, let me write a message to him,” Bucky begs an hour later as two Russian scientists stand in front of him with a pair of dull metal pliers and a noted lack of laughing gas. “Please, he’s not going to know what to do when he wakes up without any fucking teeth!”

The scientists ignore him as he twists in the tilted-back chair. One scientist brushes him with a mechanical device, and it shocks him like before. In the moment where the commands from his brain aren’t getting to his body, his jaw hangs open and they shove some sort of vice between his top and bottom back molars.

Bucky swears in English and in German, wishing he knew some Russian too; but they get the device in his mouth and crank it so it spreads his mouth splittingly wide. It aches, and they haven’t even started yanking anything yet.

The scientists talk to each other in Russian, and Bucky hears Karpov’s name in a derisive tone. Then they lock the pliers around one of his yellowed front teeth and pull.

He screams. They pull the other front tooth. He keeps screaming.

He wakes up in a bedroom. It’s still clearly a cell; there are bars over the door and, no windows, and a low metal toilet in the corner.

But there’s a radio. And there’s a bed. The bed has sheets on it. There’s a bureau with a few items of clothing.

And there’s a lot of...Russian stuff, for lack of better term. There’s a picture of Joseph Stalin framed on the wall. There’s a red flag with a yellow crescent. There are several books, although they’re all in Russian.

He categorizes all the potential routes to suicide (bed sheets for hanging; nails in floorboards for cutting; glass in picture frame, also for cutting) but his biggest priority is making a beeline for the radio.

He hasn’t seen a radio in years. It’s a nice radio; wooden with shining dials. He runs his fingers over the plastic needle that shows the station, and then switches it ‘on.’

Russian pours out at him. No music, just someone talking. It’s a man, and he sounds angry.

Bucky turns the dial and slides the needle, looking for a frequency with music. It wasn’t until the possibility was in front of him that he realized how desperately he misses music.

He finds it in the form of a broadcast of children singing in Russian. He has no idea what they're saying, but they're harmonizing decently, and they don't sound as miserable as the Russian adults on the other stations, so Bucky collapses against the wall and breathes deeply while he listens to the singing.

It actually makes him cry. The only tears he's cried since learning about Steve have been involuntary reactions to pain.

He listens for three songs until an announcer cuts in, and then he has to share this with Axel. He grabs a book, planning to use the paper inside, when he notices that one of the books is blank.

He picks up the plain green spine and flips the book open to see paper. Just paper. It's a journal of some sort, full of hundreds of pages of blank paper.

Daring to believe his luck, Bucky looks around for a pen. He finds a pencil on top of the bureau.

'Axel,' he writes as he sinks back to the floor. 'Sorry about the teeth. How are we going to eat? They put me in this room – WOW. Did you make this happen? There's MUSIC, just listen.' He closes the pencil in the journal to mark his place, and settles back against the wall, closing his eyes.

When he wakes up, he's back in the lab. This time, his hands aren't strapped down. He sees Lukin standing in front of a counter and looking at some papers, and he goes to ask, 'how long was he here?'

His mouth is still blooming with pain, but that's a side note. He has trouble getting the words out, though, because it feels like something is weighing his mouth down and getting caught as he tries to move his jaw.

His words come out garbled, and Lukin looks up.

"Identify yourself," he commands.

"Bu-he," is all that Bucky can say. Seriously, what the fuck is going on.

"Mr. Barnes. You have new teeth. A much simpler replacement than the arm, but we're still working on that." Bucky blinks and runs his flat-tipped tongue over the cool plastic in his mouth.

Bucky isn't used to good things happening to him. It makes him innately suspicious, but he can't deny that his heart leaps when Lukin mentions the arm.

Being a cripple has weighed on Bucky's soul for years – during the isolated moments when he feels enough like a person to have a soul.

He still thinks about going home sometimes. He knows that it won't happen, and that's why he doesn't have any qualms about sticking Steve in those fantasies. It's a daydream or a night dream with no basis in reality.

He thinks that as happy as Steve would be to see him, though, he'd shy away from the scarred stump of an arm. He'd be repulsed by the fact that Bucky neither looks nor thinks like a person anymore.

People have two arms and two legs. People aren't constantly thinking about the best way to off themselves. And people sure as hell can't switch into someone else with a different language and different dominant hand and wholly different personality.

If Steve saw him now, he'd be a good friend to Bucky, and that's all. There's no possible way Steve would be even remotely interested in what he and Bucky had started on scorching hot nights in Brooklyn, voices floating through the open window as Bucky buried his face into the back of Steve's neck and didn't let himself make a sound, or in abandoned buildings and foxholes sprinkled across Europe.

And with good reason; Bucky doesn't-wouldn't blame Steve in the least. Even if Karpov had never touched him, he'd still be tainted far beyond anything that Steve could ever want. Steve's not-wasn't a saint. He's still a man underneath all that justice.

Bucky becomes aware that more scientists are standing in front of him, giving him orders in Russian. He stands up and follows them, assuming that it's what they want him to do, and tells them, "I don't speak Russian," as they leave the room.

He sees Lukin smirking at him as he rounds the corner.

Bucky gets back to his comfortable cell and collapses on the bed. It's a very thin, hard mattress, but he wasn't expecting down feathers. It's still a hell of a lot nicer than the soiled pallet he's slept on for years.

He sees the journal on the floor by the bed, and picks it up to see if Axel's written him anything. He wants to ask Axel how long it took him to get used to the tooth implants, which hurt like hell but are probably for the best in the long run. It's not like he's seen his teeth in a mirror to know what they looked like, but his mouth has tasted like sewer for as long as he can remember. Now it tastes like chemicals.

The pencil is stuck in the journal, marking a page, and he opens it to see Axel's handwriting. It kills the almost-light feeling in his chest immediately.

'Do NOT trust the Russians. Nice room, new teeth. They want something. What do you think it is?'

Knowing that this correspondence is doubtlessly monitored, Bucky holds the pencil in his right hand and replies. His handwriting is a disaster beneath Axel's.

'I agree – do not trust. Do not know what they want. Never knew what Karpov wanted. Recon.'

The next time he's rotated through Axel and back to Bucky, he finds more words in the journal. He senses that he's been gone for a week or so based on the fact that his mouth feels completely healed.

'They keep asking questions about how Karpov made me. Tried to explain that Karpov didn't make me, you did, but they don't get it.'

Bucky gets a sinking feeling and sucks on the dull tip of the pencil before replying. He feels graphite stick to the surface of his fake teeth.

'I think they're trying to brainwash you. That seemed to be Karpov's plan, though it didn't work.'

'Brainwash me how? Make me work for them if you won't?' Axel writes back. It occurs to Bucky that no one's tried to get him to work for the Russians yet. He mostly stays in his cell, eats twice a day, brushes his new teeth, and listens to the radio. Occasionally, scientists stand in his doorway and speak to him in Russian, to which he shrugs and tunes them out.

'Maybe. I'm sure you're easier to rewrite – no offense.'

Later that day, he's taken to a conference room with Lukin. He sits down, unfettered, and Lukin sits across from him at a long, red table.

"What's your plan for me and Axel?" Bucky asks straightaway. Lukin rubs the bridge of his nose like's being overly taxed already.

"Axel has much better manners than you do," he tells Bucky.

"Look, we know we're not here for the hospitality or the dental work. Tell me what you want. You don't even know – we might cooperate." Lukin flips open a file, and to his surprise, Bucky sees pictures of himself alongside the typewritten Russian notes.

Damn; he truly does look like shit. Sallow, greasy, and wan. To think he'd actually been a good-looking bastard once.

"The truth, Mr. Barnes, is that even we do not know what we want. Karpov had a specific objective, and he failed to attain it. We are collecting data to determine whether we want to pursue the original objective, or further Karpov's project. And incidentally," he tells Bucky as he removes a piece of paper from the file, "you don't have a history of cooperation."

"I can try," Bucky says baldly. Lukin hums.

"Yes, that trying is what I'm interested in. According to Axel, that trying is how he came to be. Would you agree with his assessment?"

Axel is more intuitive than Bucky about their condition, likely because Axel owes his entire existence to it. He spends time thinking about it, whereas Bucky spends time dreaming about the bend of Steve's shoulders.

"If Axel said that, then I agree with him."

"I find it very curious that Axel speaks German but you do not. How do you think he learned it?"

Again, Bucky doesn't spend much time thinking about this.

"I have no idea. I was surrounded by German for about a year before Axel showed up. But I didn't learn how to speak it until I started asking him to tell me how to say things, and he started translating what they were saying for me."

"But you were not attempting to learn their language?"

"No." Lukin steepled his fingers and rests his chin on the point.

"See, that is very important, I think. We are either to think that your subconscious learned and stored the language, which Axel then took advantage of, or we are to think that Axel was developing all along, listening." He eyes Bucky.

Bucky certainly can't account for all of his pre-Axel time. There'd been a lot of sleeping, a lot of blacking out from pain, and a lot of drifting between layers of consciousness for lack of anything else to do.

"When did you first become aware of Axel?"

"In the machine." Lukin prompts him to elaborate. "Uh, there's this electricity machine, but it doesn't hook up to your body, it hooks up to your head. And that's when he started coming out."

Except Bucky remembers Karpov seeing Axel before that, during the moments when Bucky would have sold his own mother to be off the table and away from that man.

“Interesting,” Lukin tells him. Bucky doesn’t really agree. “So, if I may hypothesize, you wanted to be cooperative. To stop the torture and to stop Karpov’s...special treatment.” Bucky looks down at the table as Lukin studies him. He wasn’t sure if Lukin knew about that.

“And in wanting to be cooperative, you created someone who is cooperative. This is very significant,” he says as he clicks a pen and begins to write in the file.

Bucky’s no scientist; he isn’t even a high school graduate. He doesn’t think that Karpov is right, though. The fact is that he *has* cooperated at times, and Axel is sometimes *uncooperative*. Axel isn’t a flat idea; he’s basically a person, and it’s not that simple. Not by a long shot.

Moreover, Axel is a shield. When the pain and the dehumanization shut Bucky down, Axel popped up to take over. Bucky’s never doubted that Axel comes from the breakage of Bucky’s mind.

He doesn’t say anything to Lukin, and he’s taken back to his cell. He switches on the radio, and one of the scientists tries to talk to him, pointing at the radio and waving his hands.

“I got nothin’,” Bucky tells him. The man keeps it up anyway.

Bucky’s flipping through one of the Russian books out of boredom as the Radio plays a grand speech. It probably isn’t live, but he knows it’s a speech because of the echoing of the speaker system and the cheering of a crowd.

He’s occupying himself by looking at the words written in the Cyrillic alphabet and trying to look for repeating ones. He figures these are words like ‘the’ and ‘a.’

The guard peering in at him through the bars over his door appears to approve, and Bucky finally closes the book, decides he’s tired, and settles on the bed for a few hours of sleep. Maybe Axel will float to the surface; maybe not.

The man yells at him, and Bucky opens his eyes, crinkling his eyebrows.

“What?” he asks. He knows these people speak *some* English.

The man unlocks the door and comes into the room, pulling Bucky’s shoulder and shoving him to the floor.

“What the fuck?” Bucky yells. Two other scientists file in, one of whom carries a bar with a chain and metal ball attached to it. It reminds Bucky of a mace without spikes. He still doesn’t like the look of it.

The first scientist picks up the book and offers it to Bucky again. Bewildered, he takes it and opens it again. He props himself up against his bed, sitting on the floor, and the scientists relax. But they don’t leave.

An hour later, they’ve talking softly in Russian and Bucky leans his head back against the bed, shutting his eyes for a second.

The metal ball of the weapon catches him in the jaw, likely shattering the side of his face. He

screams and tastes blood as he clutches the broken jaw in his hand. They yell at him, and he doesn't know what they're saying. He shuts his eyes again, and they hit him in the rib cage.

Bucky comes back to himself sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. There are still two scientists, and he feels ragged. His face and ribs still hurt like hell, and it would be lovely to curl up in the bed and actually sleep for a bit.

He lets his head droop to his chest, careful of his broken jaw, and they slap him right in the mending break.

His new teeth are sharper than his real ones, and every time he's hit like this, he slices open his cheeks. Blood blooms in his mouth and trickles out his lips, making a mess on the front of his shirt.

He opens his eyes, and they leave him alone.

He closes his eyes, and they kick him in the groin.

Okay, he gets it. Sleep deprivation. He knows this one from the army, even if Karpov hadn't favored it.

Two days later, whatever serum is running through his veins is about to give up the ghost. He simply can't stay awake any longer. He can't keep food down, he can't focus on anything, and he keeps slipping back and forth to Axel. Axel also isn't allowed to sleep, but they can at least take turns bearing this.

When even the pain they inflict on him can't keep Bucky's head up, they drag him down the long, red hallway and put him into a small room he's never seen before. The thought makes him laugh. He's never seen most of the rooms in here before.

They put him on a low platform that starts moving as soon as he steps on it. Slowly, it rolls forward, and Bucky lurches with it. The room fills with scientists, all armed with shock devices. He gets it again; he has to keep moving.

He loses track of time, but he estimates that he's been awake for over a week. They drag him back to the conference room eventually as he shuffles his legs behind him, unsure if he's walking or not.

"Have a seat, Mr. Barnes," Lukin tells him, and he thinks 'seat' as they drop his body into the chair like so much dead weight. "I wish to have a conversation with you, and you may not sleep until we're done." Bucky grunts.

"From this point out, Barnes and Axel are useless to me. They will be punished for being useless to me. This experience is just the beginning of many similar experiences you will face." Bucky pitches forward, and a scientist grabs him by the neck to pull him back to sitting.

"Should you develop a third, unique personality, he will be treated well. He will have plenty to eat, and much of his time will be his own. He might even get some records to play," Lukin tells him matter-of-factly. Bucky regrets letting them see how much music means to him.

"You and Axel will not be treated well here. Vanya will."

"Who's Vanya?" Bucky asks haltingly.

“Vanya is the personality we are going to create.” It takes a while to sink it, but then Bucky laughs. Judging by Lukin’s expression, he sounds completely unhinged.

“You wanna make another one,” he slurs. Lukin nods tightly. “They’re not like plants. I can’t fucking sprout one at will.”

“We’ve studied Karpov’s methodology,” Lukin starts to tell him, and that’s all Bucky remembers.

He wakes up sometime later, and it’s clear that his sleep wasn’t nearly deep enough. The journal is on the bed beside him, and he flips it open to see Axel has written ‘???’

Groaning, Bucky grabs the pencil and tries to clear his thoughts to explain their situation to Axel.

‘Lukin is trying to create a third personality. Wants to torture it out of us, like how I got you. I’m all for it if it helps us, but I don’t know HOW.’

He hears the clang of his door opening, and looks up to see a row of scientists holding actual guns this time.

“I’m not going with you,” he says, hoping they’ll just go ahead and shoot him.

One does; in the foot. Bucky screams as they drag him from the room, smearing blood along the red tile hallways as he struggles and screams. It barely shows; Bucky guesses that’s the point.

His days become an endless cycle.

First, there’s pain, and a lot of it.

Second, after the pain and for a much shorter period, Lukin comes to him. He talks about Mother Russia, about bread and prosperity for all, about all the economic and political good Stalin is doing. He’s teased with Russian records, more books, and food. Bucky nods and agrees to everything; yes, Russia is pretty fucking great. Sure, it would be a privilege to be a citizen. Absolutely, he’s in awe of everything. But it’s not Bucky’s loyalty they want.

They put him in a cage that holds him underwater, and they hold him there until he blacks out. Then they pull him out before he can fully drown. They do this over and over, sometimes dozens of times in a row.

They hold his mouth open and shove a tube down his throat. They pump in gallons and gallons of water as he feels his stomach split and sees his body distort.

They insert wedges under his fingernails and toenails and they push. Then they clamp the digits in vises and screw and screw until blood oozes out.

They pour acid and something sticky and hot as fire on him.

They dangle him from the rafters in creative ways.

They make him stand for days in rooms with spikes, and he eventually has to curl up and black out as the spikes impale him like thorns.

They play high-pitched buzzing noises twenty-four/seven and walk around with earplugs while Bucky holds his head and cries.

And Lukin shows him an itemized list one day of all the methods of “convincing” they know. He’s not even a tenth of the way down the list. He’s literally ready to do anything for them, except he *doesn’t know* how to do what they’re asking.

“Why are you still resisting?” Lukin asks him many months later.

Bucky looks up from the ground where his whole back is flayed and raw and starting to scab. Lukin steps forward to put a foot on his back and grounds down.

Bucky becomes Axel, but only minutes later, he’s back. Axel’s going through exactly what Bucky is, and sometimes, he can’t take it either. They haven’t been able to write to each other in a while, but they’re connected by their pain and how badly they just want to close their eyes one last time.

“I can’t do it. Axel was an accident; you’ve more than replicated what Karpov did, and there’s still no one else,” Bucky tells him like the Axel interlude hadn’t happened.

“That’s not acceptable,” Lukin tells him, and for the first time, Bucky hears a tremor of fear in his voice. He’s always been a little curious what happened to Karpov in the sense that he hopes he died a painful and ignoble death; he wonders if Lukin is also on the chopping block. Then he wonders who’s pulling their strings, and why that person or organization wants Bucky to be a brainwashed Commie so badly.

It says worlds about Russia’s success in recreating the super soldier serum for themselves.

“I’m a failed experiment. You should cut your losses and kill me.” He blinks as a new idea comes to him. “Yeah, kill me and dissect me. Find out what makes me tick.”

“You assume you must be dead for me to dissect you,” Lukin sneers. Bucky gives up and drifts away on the floor.

He actually must sleep, because he dreams. He barely dreams anymore; his subconscious must know that replaying old images and fantasies about Steve, even the innocuous ones, is an even more painful form of torture than anything Department X can conjure up. Because he’d have to wake up from that and go back to his life. That’s too painful; it’s best not to dream altogether.

In this dream, however, Bucky’s walking through the streets of Brooklyn. No one is around, which would never actually happen in real life, and he’s looking for something. He has no idea what it is.

Some of the streets are exactly like he remembers, and some are blurry and confusing, supplied by the dream. He walks in circles and searches, feeling like he should be calling out, but he doesn’t know for whom.

He walks into an alley that joins with other alleys and becomes a dark passage. His heart races. Maybe it’s back here.

Behind a stack of crates, he sees a crouched figure, and he starts forward. The figure lifts its head, and it’s Bucky, only a worn and weathered Bucky with hair tumbling down to his back. He gasps as he crouches before it, and sees that the man’s hands are in shackles.

“You’re not who I’m looking for,” he hears himself say.

“Who are you looking for?” the other Bucky asks. The answer comes to Bucky then.



“Blonde kid. This high,” he says as he lifts his hand, “and a waist you can put your hands around. He’s probably around here somewhere causing trouble.”

“I haven’t seen him,” the man says. “Can I come find him with you?” His eyes are bright and fevered.

“No,” Bucky says for no apparent reason. “You don’t know him. Bye.”

He stands up and walks away, and continues searching for what feels like decades.

When Bucky wakes up, he’s back in his room. He’s lying on his stomach to protect his flayed back, and he feels his stomach cramp with hunger pains.

He doesn’t move, thinking about the dream and how much he wishes he’d been able to see Steve. Even if it would be that much harder to wake up in Department X, he wants just a glimpse.

He thinks about the man he did see, the other Bucky. He only remembers that he had long hair and an accent and –

“Shit,” Bucky says as he fumbles to his feet. He eyes the journal on the shelf before grabbing it and flipping through the pages.

No new messages from Axel await him. He grabs the pencil and writes, in shaking hands, ‘Did you dream about seeing me in an alley?’

Later, after Bucky’s feet are broken and he’s dragged back to his room, he sees the journal sitting on the bed. Using his arm, he pulls himself forward and crawls up the side of his bed without putting weight on his feet.

‘YES. What does this mean?’ Axel’s written back.

Bucky doesn’t know, but it feels very important. Not important enough not to black the fuck out right now, though.

“You know how much we need you, Vanya,” Lukin is telling him as Bucky slides back over Axel.

The man looks eager for a second before Bucky says, “Just me. Wait, did you do it?”

Lukin looks furious. “No,” he says as he works his jaw.

“How do you even know what his name will be?” Bucky asks, staring at Lukin through bleary eyes. He notices that his face feels swollen and wonders what happened to Axel.

“He will be my creation,” Lukin tells him, puffing up his chest.

“Axel wasn’t anyone’s creation. He came with a name and a personality and everything. Even if you manage to break another one off, I don’t think you have that much control over him,” Bucky says. He really isn’t going for insubordination, but Lukin presses a button to shock him anyway.

“Listen to me,” Lukin tells him, taking Bucky’s face in his hands. He holds him gently, but Bucky’s entire face stings like someone’s ripped off layers of skin. “Listen to me, Vanya.”

“Still Bucky. I’m really sorry.”

“Vanya, I know that you’re in there. I need you to show yourself. Times are hard right now, and we need a patriot to help the cause. We need you to fight the West,” he says, and then he starts in on Russian.

It feels a little star-spangled-man to Bucky. Axel’s pretty cool, but he’s wary about having another personality that’s a communist psycho like the other Russians he knows.

Unsurprisingly, nothing happens. They force a tube down Bucky’s throat and pour in a liquid that he thinks shuts down most of his internal organs and leaves him a filthy mess as it works its way out of his system. His organs come back on the grid eventually, and he curses Arnim Zola in German for hours.

It’s hard to know what the precise level of trauma required to split Bucky’s psyche is, but he knows that they’ve reached it when he wakes up and isn’t being tortured anymore.

He’s not in (much) pain, and he’s (relatively) clean. He’s lying on the bed with a stack of Russian records and a Victrola at his elbow. The journal is open and face-down on his chest. Bucky rubs at his eyes and picks it up.

‘Hello,’ it says. ‘They say to write in here and tell you who I am. I am Yasha. Also, to tell you to go away. You are not needed, and more of the same will happen to you if you come back.’

Bucky sees that Axel has already written a message back: ‘This is not your body. We share this body. We must work together to survive. You’re a communist – you should like that. PS – Aren’t you supposed to be named Vanya?’

The corner of Bucky’s mouth turns up at Axel’s note. He contributes to the message.

‘That is Axel; I am Bucky. This started as MY body. I was born in 1921. You are both new. I am an American soldier and POW. Tell us about yourself.’

Bucky tucks the journal under the bed and moves to explore the records. As he’s loading an opera record and setting the needle, a scientist comes to the door eagerly and bangs on the bars. He addresses Bucky in Russian, and Bucky doesn’t respond, not sure if he’ll be punished for being himself at the moment.

The man catches on that it’s the American in the room, but he goes away and doesn’t hurt Bucky. A few minutes later, Lukin comes to the bars and looks in.

“Mr. Barnes. I was not sure if we would see you again, but perhaps it is good for us to talk.”

“You want me to go away,” Bucky says. Lukin smiles coldly at him.

“Yes. Yes I do. I have no use for you or the other one; I’ve created a true weapon of the Soviet Union.”

“Is he everything you wanted?” Bucky asks sarcastically. “Is he a good comrade?”

“We have been molding and shaping him for months,” Lukin says. And Bucky doesn’t think he’s ever not had control of his body for that long. He’s been out for *months*?

“So you couldn’t brainwash me, so you spent years and probably thousands of dollars to make someone you could brainwash,” Bucky laughs bitterly. “There must be somethin’ real good in my

veins.”

“It’s hardly brainwashing when there’s nothing to overwrite,” Lukin tells him.

“Nothing at all? Complete blank slate?” Bucky asks.

“Just waiting for an artist,” Lukin confirms.

“Huh. Cool,” Bucky says as he picks up the record sleeve to look at the artwork. “His name is actually Yasha,” he tells him before turning up the volume.

“Yasha is a Jewish name; he’s not called Yasha,” Lukin raises his voice to be heard over the trilling female voice. He sounds angry. Bucky shrugs and hides a smile.

“I’m just the messenger. Guess maybe there was something to overwrite.” He gets caned for the comment.

Bucky wakes up back in the room some time later. He’s not wearing a shirt, and as he looks down the length of his body, he notices that he’s put some meat back on his ribs. They were starting to poke out there in a way that couldn’t help but remind Bucky of prisoners in the Hydra camp back in ’43.

He finds the journal on the bureau and flips it open to see that Yasha’s been quite the prolific writer.

‘Greetings Bucky and Axel. This is Yasha. Or as they call me, Vanya. But really my name is Yasha.

‘I am very surprised that you are American, Bucky. I was very angry when I learned this, but then I realized that this must be the point. They must make a weapon out of the enemy and turn it back on the capitalists.

‘However, I realize that even if we are enemies, we must be allies if we share so much. Comrade Lukin would like me to get rid of you both, but that seems selfish if I did not have this body first.

‘I am told that it is 1951, so we must be 30 years old. Where are we from, and how did we come to be here? What is happening to you both? I know that you are being hurt, and I truly do not want that for you.

‘Is this how we are to communicate? How did Axel come to be? Do we have any say over who is in control?’

Bucky’s first thought is that he’s 30. He’s gob smacked by that fact, both because it implies he’s been imprisoned for six years now, and because he’d never, *never* expected to make it this far. Even as a teenager, while he’d felt awfully infinite and indestructible standing by Steve’s side, he’d seen what the world did to adults.

And then the war.

And then his capture by Hydra.

How the hell is it fair that he’s made it to thirty when he prays for death every damn day, and Steve’s already long gone?

The thought makes him too emotional, and he isn't ready to write back. Some of the questions are too big to be answered in paper and pencil anyway, especially when they're being monitored.

The next time Bucky wakes up, he's dressed in a sharp, green uniform. The lapels are red with gold stars. His hair has been cut and smoothed back with pomade. And there's a freaky-looking metal arm filling out his left sleeve.

He immediately pulls the jacket off to look at the arm. It's very thin from his shoulder down to the hand, which looks like curved fork tines. He can move the arm at the shoulder, but the elbow has to be worked manually, and the fingers are more like hooks. It's a monstrosity that would terrify any child and make any adult at least very uncomfortable. He doesn't know if he likes it or not.

He takes another look at the uniform and sees that it's already quite decorated. There are a number of colorful ribbons and medals that suggest numerous accolades on Yasha's part.

"What have you been up to, Yasha?" he wonders aloud, feeling queasy at the thought of his body being used against the United States. From what Lukin's told him, the United States and Russia are more or less at war, though no one's told Bucky what happened to get them there.

He flips through the journal and sees a message from Yasha.

'August 12 – Leaving to attend a training camp for the Soviet Army. I have already been promoted and am eager to earn it. I am told that if either of you show up while I am gone, you will be hurt quite badly, so please do not do that.'

'October 9 – I have returned from training. It was quite difficult at first, but I have worked to regain my physique. I met many other soldiers fighting for our cause. I have been promoted again. Thank you for staying inside – you may come out now.'

Yasha doesn't really seem to get it, does he?

Bucky takes the uniform off and leaves it in a heap on the floor. He puts on underwear and a white t-shirt, and settles back on the bed to respond.

'Yasha, we cannot read your messages until we are awake. Congratulations on your promotion. What are they having you do? I do not understand this conflict with America, but I can promise you that it's being hyped up on both sides. Please do not believe all the propaganda they give you. I would not believe all the American propaganda myself. What do you do in the Army?'

'Axel, how are you?'

He gets off the bed and continues to explore. He's obviously lost another huge chunk of time while Yasha was at Marxist boot camp, and he wonders if there's anything new.

And there is. In addition to new books and new clothes, there's a half-gone pack of cigarettes in one of the drawers. He finds a lighter as well, and he grins as he puts one of the cigarettes between his plastic teeth and holds the flame to the end.

He hasn't smoked in more than half a decade. Of course it burns his lungs, but pain that he himself chooses to inflict actually feels pretty damn good. He sits on the floor next to the crumpled uniform, and passive-aggressively blows smoke on the stiff fabric.

A scientist come to the door and yells at him in Russian.

“I’m the American,” he says nonchalantly without looking up. In all honesty, he doesn’t care if he goes back to Yasha. They’re probably going to torture him before too long, and he’s got no reason to be cognizant.

He finishes his cigarette and decides that’s enough time on top. He grounds it out on the uniform with glee, and then closes his eyes and tries to sink down.

He opens his eyes as scientists are coming into the room with heavy sticks. He’s moved, and now he’s sitting closer to the bed with the journal in his lap.

‘I do not think I have been awake much,’ it says, ‘but I share Bucky’s warning. Yasha, I am not American, and I still caution you to beware what the Russians tell you. I do not claim that you should fight for any side. Just be mindful about the things they tell you and look around you to see if they are really true.

‘Also, it is a pleasure to wake up with muscle definition having done no work.’

Bucky laughs at Axel’s contribution even as he realizes he called up the wrong guy. The scientists circle him and raise their sticks.

“No, give me a minute, I’ll try to bring him again,” he tells them. They hit him anyway.

The next time Bucky regains consciousness, he’s dressed in the uniform again. He looks at the journal before he tries to put himself out.

‘Thank you for the advice, although it is not necessary. I see these things for myself – I see that the words of Comrade Stalin do not always correspond with what I see in the countryside.’

So he’s been leaving the facility again, Bucky thinks. Lucky bastard.

‘I know in my heart, though, that this is the nature of these things. It takes time for people to let go of themselves and embrace a larger goal. The changes we are making will not happen overnight – they take work and effort and sometimes sacrifice.

‘I am currently limited by the lack of an arm. It prohibits me from training like some of the soldiers do. They tell me that Bucky used to be a sniper, which fills me with admiration. Even if I get a better arm, one that I can control, like they tell me, I do not think I will be very good with guns. They make it impossible for all men to be equal, even though I understand that they are needed right now. And my aim is not very good.

‘Truthfully, I am mostly a figurehead. They use me to motivate the soldiers, even though I do not do actual fighting. I wish to contribute more. Bucky, are you an important American soldier? They tell me that I am a recognized face, that that people will rally behind me because of who I am and the fact that I now fight for them. I suspect that you are someone who was very feared by Russians.’

Bucky rereads the words. So Yasha’s...well, he’s the Commie equivalent of Captain America, before they gave Steve his own unit. It makes him bitter and giddy at the same time. Yasha can’t and doesn’t even fight; he’s a figurehead. After years of singular focus and attempting to rip a super soldier out of Bucky’s damaged mind, they get another star spangled man.

And of course it’s a big deal to the Russians that Captain America’s sidekick now fights for them. Bucky hopes that news makes its way across the Atlantic and someone’s sent to put him out of this

misery.

Bucky stays awake and aware for a few days. He's positive that he's about to be dragged off and tortured again to make Yasha come back, but he says off-handedly to Lukin "You've got to give him a rest. He's still young, and you can't expect him to be ready to take over all the time yet." It makes Lukin pause, and he actually leaves Bucky alone. He doesn't even know if what he said is true.

The next time he wakes up, his arm has been upgraded. It's much thicker now, resembling an actual arm, and there's a red star painted on the shoulder. Star-spangled indeed, he thinks.

He gets a jolt of surprise when he can actually move his fingers. They're clumsy, and they crush the first cigarette he tries to pick up, but he practices for several hours. When he flips open the journal, he can't believe he's actually going to be able to write left-handed again.

'As you can see, we have been gifted with a new arm. It is far superior to the last one. It is supposed to help me be a better soldier.

'Unfortunately, my prediction was accurate. I am not the sniper Bucky was, and they are very angry about it. I am actually not a very good soldier when it comes down to it, but I would rather speak to people about Comrade Stalin's vision and the philosophy behind Socialism. I have read very extensively on the subject, and I am becoming a good orator. It seems that this is not precisely what Comrade Lukin wants, and they have begun to threaten me.

'I have trouble accepting what I see as selfishness in the Soviet Army and the Communist Party, when there are ways to do things that would benefit the people more. I have spoken out about these things and been punished. I struggle to see what course I should take. I know you are not my conscience, but what is to be done here?'

Bucky knows what he should recommend, but he worries what will happen to them if Yasha openly defies the Russians. They won't...they can't possibly try to create a *fourth* personality, can they?

He thinks about it for several hours and then clenches the pencil in his metal hand. He writes, 'Stay strong,' and spends the rest of his time awake agonizing about it.

He wakes up strapped to a table. Lukin is peering down at him. The journal is in his hands.

"Now I see where this disobedience is coming from," he sneers. He holds the open journal nearly against Bucky's face, and he sees his words, 'stay strong,' circled likely by Axel.

"I didn't do anything," Bucky says automatically. His muscles ache, and he wonders if Axel or Yasha's taken the latest punishment. "You indoctrinated him too well. He's the perfect communist, and apparently the shit your country is doing isn't up to snuff."

"You and the German have been encouraging him," Lukin says as he shuts the journal with a snap. He stares at Bucky for a moment, and then slaps him in the face. They both breathe quietly for several minutes.

"You cannot know," Lukin tells him, rubbing the bridge of his nose, "how much work has gone into this project. How much time. How many resources. And now everything is in jeopardy."

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” Bucky asks incredulously. “I’m sorry that you didn’t torture me enough, or in the right ways, to make your soviet super soldier? Seriously?” He tips his head back and smirks. “I’ll never feel sorry for you. I’m hoping that your boss will kill us both for your failure.”

Lukin looks wide-eyed and furious, and Bucky realizes that he’s spot-on about the consequences of this screw-up. He smirks wider.

“Not sorry at all.”

“This is done,” Lukin snaps, throwing the journal aside. Bucky can’t track where it lands. “You are done communicating. Whenever you or Axel surface, expect pain; Vanya is the only one who will get off that table again.”

“His name’s still Yasha,” Bucky defends, “And you’re not going about this right. Even I know that we rotate in and out more when there’s torture involved. It’s basic; we want to get away from it. So if you’re gonna torture Yasha too, then he’s gonna check out more. Really man. I know you’re a better evil scientist than this.”

His insolence earns Bucky half a dozen jolts of electricity straight to his genitals.

Lukin keeps his word, and Bucky wakes up on the table every time. He’s always in pain, and he knows that Yasha isn’t giving in.

For the first time, it occurs to Bucky that his alternate personalities might be better men than he is. Axel is obviously smarter than Bucky is, having launched their most successful escape attempt which Bucky then fucked up. And he’s much more easy going. He thinks, from their conversations, that Axel might be kinder. He’s certainly the most invested in helping the other two personalities.

And Yasha is oddly principled. Bucky thinks that most of the stuff he spouts off about is bullshit, but Yasha clearly believes it, and he’s willing to suffer for it. Unlike the other two, Yasha could stop the torture, but he’s subjecting himself to it because he believes it’s right. Goddammit, he reminds Bucky of Steve.

And then there’s Bucky. What, exactly, does Bucky bring to the group? He’s stubborn as all hell, which has never worked out in their favor. He’s a pretty good fighter, though he’s years out of practice. And he’s got the memories. That’s all.

He suddenly needs to talk to them. The Russians are getting nowhere and they’re going to get nowhere; Lukin has failed, but he doesn’t seem to know what to do with them now. They need to try something new. They need to combine all of their individual strengths and find a way to end this.

But how are they supposed to do that without access to the journal?

Bucky thinks about it for days. He wakes up from a rare dream about pulling Steve into his lap and smelling the ink-and-graphite smell that’s just *Steve*, and he remembers another dream about Steve from a while ago.

He remembers looking for Steve without luck, and finding Axel instead.

There’s nothing to tell him that it will or won’t work, so he begins trying to reach out to the others

with his mind. When he's actively being beaten or electrocuted or cut, it's hard to focus, but the aftermath when he lies there with pain surrounding him like a blanket is a good enough time.

He starts with Axel, because he's known him longer and they've made contact before. He clears his mind and, feeling stupid, tries to reach out to Axel.

He has no idea what he's doing.

'Axel,' he shouts in his mind. 'Come on, come here, I need to talk to you.' He doesn't hear anything back besides the pain ringing in his head.

Next he tries waiting until he's falling under and about to reach the calm, floating feeling he gets before he voluntarily switches. He's almost there, and he consciously makes himself pull back. He pictures Axel as he'd looked in the dream, and tries to talk to him. He thinks he's controlling what imaginary Axel says, though.

He tries every day that he's awake. He tries for a long time. And it doesn't get him anywhere.

Finally, he thinks to try going back into the alley. He makes his sore body relax and envisions himself slowly walking through the deserted streets of Brooklyn, just like in the dream. He takes turns, scuffs over brick pathways, and looks behind every crate and trashcan.

While he's walking around his mind one day, he looks up and sees his old building. He sees the apartment he'd shared with Steve, and it looks like there's a light on.

He lets himself in and walks up the stairs, heart pounding in real life, wondering if Steve will be home. He pauses with his hand on the imaginary doorknob, and forces himself to focus. It would be amazing if Steve were inside and if Bucky could see him for a bit, but that's not going to help him or the others right now. He needs *Axel* to be inside the apartment. He needs to talk to Axel. Axel, you have to be inside.

He thinks about everything he knows about Axel. He tries to hold onto the image of the apartment door while letting himself fall backwards in his mind. Come on, Axel.

He opens the door and Axel is curled up on the rickety bed.

"Bucky?" he asks, sounding confused and looking around at the cramped space.

"Axel," he breathes, and then everything goes black.

He knows it worked. He knows he broke through some wall and talked to Axel. He also knows that he couldn't sustain the connection and keep control of their body; he assumes Axel floated up in his place.

He tries walking through Brooklyn again, forcing himself to slow down and really envision everything, before going up to the apartment. It's important that he do everything exactly like he did the last time. When he gets upstairs, the door is already open and Axel is waiting inside. They eye each other up for a moment, and then Axel awkwardly steps forward.

"Thank god, I tried to do what you did," Axel tells him.

"Wait, you're doing this?" Bucky asks.



“I don’t know,” Axel says helplessly, and then he laughs. He sounds both panicked and delighted.

“How did you get the details of the apartment right?” Bucky asks as he starts to walk around. The battered, torn couch is exactly as he remembers. The picture of Steve’s parents is in its place on the shelf.

“Shit, I don’t know. Maybe you are doing it.” Axel looks around again. “Where are we?”

“This is where I lived before the war,” Bucky says, sitting down on the couch. He can’t really feel the plushness, but he figures the visual details count enough.

“Yeah. I forgot you have memories before Karpov,” Axel tells him. He doesn’t sound bitter, just blank.

“They’re our memories,” Bucky argues. Because he certainly isn’t the same Bucky he was when he lived in this apartment. Maybe he’s also a new personality and the happy, handsome James Buchanan Barnes died in the gorge.

“We should get Yasha here,” Axel insists. Bucky agrees, but then they don’t know how to go about it. In trying to will Yasha into the room, Bucky loses the connection and wakes up with a noose around his neck, cutting off his airflow. The scientists loosen it, and he gasps loud and painful breaths, thinking that he knows where Yasha was.

The next time Bucky and Axel meet, they agree that all three of them have to be relatively unconscious for this to work. If Yasha or any one of them is in the present being tortured, then he can’t be in this common space. Axel also thinks that time passes differently when they’re together, which sounds plausible to Bucky.

It takes several tries. Bucky and Axel get to the place where they can connect, and Axel tells him that he’s found Yasha, but they can’t manage to link all three of them at once. In the facility, Lukin continues to torment all three of them, seemingly just punishing them for his own failure more than using concerted efforts to bring about a desired result.

But they do get there, and one day, when Bucky is very exhausted and very much wanting to curl up in his bed in Brooklyn, he pictures the apartment, and they’re all there.

Yasha’s hair is the shortest of the three, and he’s also in the best shape. He still has some of Barnes’ old handsomeness, while Bucky and Axel look like miserable bums. He’s jealous for a second, before he realizes that this is probably just how they see themselves.

“Bucky, it’s good to finally meet you,” Yasha says eagerly. Bucky nods.

“Okay, so if we’ve done this once, then we can find our way back here. Lukin took away the journal,” he explains. Yasha listens eagerly while Axel stares at him, arms crossed. “So this is how we’ll talk. I think we need to come up with a plan to either definitely die, or to get out.”

“There are sheets in the room,” Yasha says thoughtfully, “We could make a-”

“Already tried that,” Axel tells him.

“Okay, there’s glass in the picture frame.”

“Yeah, tried that too,” Bucky tells him. “There’s cameras in every corner of that room. They find

you before you can do enough damage.”

Yasha looks crestfallen.

“I didn’t know you’d already attempted,” he says finally.

“The recent past for you has been going on a while for us,” Bucky replies. “But, that means we do have some ideas. Axel escaped from Karpov’s facility near Moscow. How’d you do it?” he asks, turning to Axel.

“Karpov?” Yasha asks. Axel and Bucky exchange a glance, and Axel looks at the floor.

“I made the Hydra guards trust me. I got one of them to take me to the dorms to listen to a radio program about the Nuremburg Trials, and then I knocked him out and stole his suit.”

Bucky looks impressed; Yasha looks skeptical.

“They’re not going to trust any of us like that,” he says what they’re all thinking.

“No,” Bucky agrees. “We have to brainstorm. We have to learn the layout better.”

Yasha and Bucky start to discuss all the rooms and hallways they’ve been in while Axel wanders around.

“Who are these people?” he asks as he stands in front of the picture on the shelf.

“Those are Steve’s parents,” Bucky tells him.

“Steve?”

“Steve’s my friend. He died in the war,” he says with a pang. “This was our apartment. We lived together after his parents died.”

They lose Yasha before too long, and then Bucky wakes up again. He feels invigorated. He’s connected the threads of his mind, and he’s not alone in this anymore. They’re going to come up with something; he’s positive.

They meet as often as they can. They talk about every angle of exit, every possible moment when they might be able to slip their jailers’ hold. It doesn’t take long for them to exhaust all their intel, even when they tell it from different perspectives.

“Tell us more about Steve,” Yasha asks from where’s sitting on the floor of the living room. Axel nods.

“Uh, why?” Bucky asks. Even though he’s in the safety of his own head, he hasn’t talked about Steve in a very long time.

“Because you’re hoarding the memories,” Axel tells him with a slight smile. “Yasha and I talked, and we want you to share.” Yasha nods.

“All we have to think about is what’s happened to us as prisoners. We realized that you have a lot more,” he explains. It kind of makes sense. Bucky doesn’t know what they dream about or what they think about when they need to remember that things haven’t always been like this. Except for them, he realizes, things have always been like this.

“Okay, I’ll tell you some stories,” he agrees.

“About Steve,” Axel requests.

“Why Steve? I have a thousand stories. I have stories about girls, stories about movies, stories about the Howling Commandos...”

“Because there’s a picture of his parents in our mind,” Axel tells him. “So I’m guessing he’s the most important story you’ve got.” It’s a fair point. Bucky’s just wildly protective of Steve. He doesn’t mind sharing, but he’s afraid that he won’t be able to frame the story exclusively in terms of friendship, and he doesn’t want the other occupants of his mind thinking he’s queer or he’s sick or, god, that he’d *liked* what Karpov did to him.

But he takes a breath, and tells them about the first time he’d met Steve. Seven-years-old, scraped knees, and Bucky knew his place was between the world and Steve with one glance.

They’re fascinated. They ask questions. They probably fall a little in love with Steve too, from the way that Bucky describes him. It feels so bittersweet to be able to talk like this and have someone listen, someone appreciate all of Steve’s good qualities and roll their eyes at the bad.

It makes sense, actually. He can’t believe he imagined for a second that there’s any part of Bucky that doesn’t completely belong to Steve.

Bucky wakes up back in the electric machine that he remembers from Karpov’s facility. He’s still in Department X, but the plate covers his forehead and there’s rubber between his teeth.

He identifies himself to Lukin when they take the rubber out, and Lukin barely acknowledges him.

“You’re making another one?” Bucky catches on. Lukin looks at him with wary eyes and doesn’t answer. “Oh Jesus. What makes you think this one will be better than the last.”

“We have no choice,” Lukin snaps. “Just cooperate.”

“What happens if you fail again?” Bucky asks mulishly. “Bet Uncle Joe won’t like that.” The scientists around him mutter.

“Him, I am not so concerned about,” Lukin mutters. Bucky makes a mental note to ask Yasha if he knows who Lukin’s higher-ups are before they turn on the machine again and he goes away.

“They’re trying to make another personality,” he tells them later.

“A fourth?” Axel asks incredulously. “How many can they make before our mind is completely fried?” They look at Bucky.

“I’m not a fucking scientist,” Bucky exclaims. “I still have no clue how any of this works. I don’t even know if brains can normally do this, or if this is all the result of the serum.” He’s told them about Zola and being experimented on before Steve had *stupidly, idiotically, dangerously* stormed the camp and pulled him off the table. They were much more interested in the part about Steve than the part about the torture, for obvious reasons. Torture’s a bit of an old subject around here.

“I’m worried about who they’ll create,” Yasha says. The others agree.

“Lukin’s got a fire under his ass to make the perfect soviet fighter. Apparently they want that more than someone to give speeches.”

“I give very inspirational speeches,” Yasha tells him cockily.

“You can’t shoot,” Bucky reminds him. “They want somebody to put the arm to good use.”

Interestingly, all three of them have two arms in this projection. Even Bucky still wants to see himself as whole.

“So they’re going to create a true soldier and send him out to fight,” Axel mediates. “That will expose all of us to physical danger.”

“More possibilities to escape if we wake up,” Bucky points out.

“When I was in training, they had guards following me around all day. I know that if either one of you showed up, they’d have hurt him.”

“It’s still the best bet we have,” Axel argues. “Or perhaps we’ll be killed.”

“Hear hear,” Bucky raises an imaginary glass.

“You still want to die?” Yasha asks him. “Now that you’ve shown us Brooklyn, you don’t want to go back there?” It stings a little.

“Steve’s dead, you know that,” Bucky tells him. “No point in going back.”

“I wouldn’t mind staying in the Soviet Union,” Yasha starts to say, but Axel interrupts.

“Are you insane? We can’t stay here. If, and I do mean if, we get out of here, we have to get to America. They’re at war with Russia; they’ll give us amnesty.”

“It’s only kind of a war,” Yasha says, but Bucky is tired of Yasha explaining how they’re at war but they’re not actually fighting. He doesn’t need to understand it. It does remind him.

“Who’s Lukin working for?” he asks Yasha, the most likely to know.

“You mean who’s in charge of Department X? I don’t completely know, but Comrade Khrushchev is at least one of the people who’s come to see me.” Bucky files that away, and then gives in to their requests for another story about Steve.

Eventually, Lukin succeeds. Bucky wakes up wearing black combat gear with gunpowder on his fingers. His entire metal arm is exposed, and he’s wearing a mask over the lower part of his face. It’s like a muzzle.

“I’m the American,” he says when some of the scientists help him take the mask off. Oddly, they look relieved to see him.

“Barnes,” Lukin says from behind Bucky, and he turns around to see that the man looks just as shell-shocked as the scientists. Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“What happened?” Lukin shakes his head. “Did you do it?” Lukin hesitates and then nods.

Bucky wipes the gunpowder on his thighs and notices that he’s flecked with blood spatter.

“Is your super soldier finally finished, or are we going to have to do this again?”

“He’s finished,” Lukin tells him quietly. “He’s perfect.” Which doesn’t explain why Lukin is so pale.

“What’s his name?”

“The asset.”

Bucky tells the others about the asset, and Yasha immediately wants to meet him. Bucky and Axel are more cautious.

The next time they meet, however, something about their focus pulls the asset into the apartment as well. He stands silently in front of them as the other three gape.

He’s dressed exactly like Bucky had been when he woke up, muzzle and all. His lanky, brown hair falls down to his shoulders. And, even in this safe space, his arm is metal and starred.

“Здравствуйте,” Yasha greets him. “Вы говорите по-английски?”

“No secret conversations,” Bucky tells him hollowly.

“I’m asking him if he speaks English,” Yasha snaps.

The asset swivels his head to look at all three of them, and as hardened as Bucky is, he’s a little scared. He wonders if the asset can kill them in their mind.

“What is this?” the asset finally asks, low and murderous. Axel starts to explain as Bucky watches the asset closely. His fingers twitch towards his waist.

The asset glares at them, even when Axel finishes explaining that they’re multiple personalities in the same body, and they can talk like this. Yasha picks up on the tension.

“Tell him about Steve, Bucky,” he suggests.

“I’m pretty sure Captain Soviet doesn’t want to hear about Captain America,” he shoots back. The asset shifts his weight.

“Steve?” Oh lord, Bucky can’t believe this is happening. He highly doubts that the asset will be as enthralled with stories about Steve as the other two are. But he needs to do something. He takes a deep breath, and starts in on the first time that Steve had scarlet fever.

The asset listens raptly.

Now that the asset exists, Lukin’s people ease up on the others. They almost seem to enjoy the time away from the asset, who must terrify them even though he’s their creation. Bucky doesn’t want to know how they engineered him or what he’s going to be used for.

Yasha even gets to read a Russian newspaper every now and then. He informs Bucky that it’s 1953. It’s been over a decade since Zola. It’s been almost that long since Steve.

Yasha eagerly report news about the Soviet Union, which the others don’t really care about. Even

the asset, when he's around, doesn't seem to care who he's fighting for.

One day, Yasha is visibly shaken and tells them all that Comrade Stalin is dead.

"Oh no," Bucky says sarcastically.

"Sorry to hear that," Axel tells him much more sincerely while glaring at Bucky.

"He struggled," the asset says, and the other three stop moving and stare at him.

"Shit," Bucky hears Axel whisper. Bucky gapes at him.

He hasn't been fully in control of his body for years now, but it's different learning that his body is actively being used to assassinate world leaders. It's an impotent, used feeling, and his hackles are raised.

The asset looks around at them, and then faces Bucky.

"Tell more about Steve," he orders woodenly, and Bucky swallows.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky wakes up in a hotel room. The mattress is skewed partially off the bed, and the carpet is orange with seemingly random bleach spots. He sits up anxiously, wondering if this is another escape, or if this is a different facility set up to look like a shitty hotel, or what.

He sees two guards standing in the door nook, and he flops back to the bed with a groan. The asset is the only one with reason and permission to leave Lukin's facility, so they must be on a mission of some sort. He catches a glimpse of a small arsenal on the second bed, and decides, definitely a mission. He wonders who the asset is killing this time.

Bucky can make the best of it while he's awake. He stands up and pads around the room checking to see if there's food or cigarettes or maybe a mini-bar. There are precisely none of those things, so he moves into the bathroom to take an actual, private shower. If this hotel has hot water, it's going to feel unbelievable good. Maybe he'll even try masturbating for the first time in twelve years. See if he can still do it or if that's gone too.

Before he can fully disrobe and step into the cramped shower stall, though, he catches his reflection in the flecked mirror. His skin look practically yellow, and his hair hangs around his shoulders again. The metal arm is all the more startling from a third-person perspective, the seam where metal meets skin scarred and swollen. And there's something black and sticky smeared around his eyes.

They're much bluer than he remembers. All the personalities have been letting their eyes darken and fade over the years as they forget the details of what they look like. Or, more plausibly, as Bucky forgets the details, because the personalities have never seen their body and have just been taking their cues from him.

He grabs a wad of toilet paper, wets it, and starts to scrub the black off his face. It mixes with the water and streams down his face like tears, and it takes several minutes and several toilet paper wads to get it all off. When he's fresh-faced, he pulls his hair back with the flesh hand and stares at himself, re-memorizing details about his face. It all comes back to him with a sense of overwhelming relief. As much as they've changed him, that's still his pop's nose and his ma's chin dimple.

As altered as his body is with the new arm, new scars, and signs of newly developed muscle over years of skin-hanging starvation, his face looks like the face from his Army photograph. He wonders who has that photograph before the implications of that hit him.

He's almost positive that he's 34. He shouldn't look like a 21-year-old kid.

He puts his face almost against the mirror, fogging it up with his breath as he starts to panic, searching his face for wrinkles and age spots. There are none.

He clamps his flesh hand over his mouth, willing the nausea back down his throat, as he acknowledges the idea that he's been willfully putting out of mind for years: he isn't really aging.

The next logical idea is that he isn't really dying. Won't die. Can't die?

He bends over to lean his forehead against the cool porcelain of the sink and wonders how long

this serum is going to keep his heart pumping and his cells rejuvenating. He guesses, feeling a fresh wave of nausea, that it's a very long time.

As long as Bucky's been a prisoner, he's played a little game in his mind. He essentially tries to reassure himself by reminding himself that all things must come to an end.

'There's no way you'll still be alive a year from now,' he'd told himself back in Karpov's facility.

'There's no way they won't have given up and killed you five years from now,' he'd lengthened the sentence with Lukin.

The finite-ness of the surety was calming. It was a light at the end of the tunnel and a promise to himself.

Once he realizes that he could conceivably still be in Department X with a psycho killer in his body *one hundred* years from now...he stops keeping track. Years and decades blur together. Nothing has meaning or brings deliverance. And Bucky has long since gotten too weary to give a fuck.

### ***Winter Soldier Files 1950-1959***

*"...It is imperative that the matter of the asset's alternate identities be kept a closely-guarded Department X secret. Should this information be leaked, even to Soviet leadership, there is potential to use the alters in a way that will harm the asset. Documentation on the alters (see files "Barnes, James," "Karpov, Axel," and "Lukin, Yasha") shows that all three have histories of subversive behavior towards the Soviet Union, suicidal propensity, and aggressive insubordination. These tendencies could be turned against the asset.*

*To guard this knowledge, all participants on the original Department X/Hydra project, led by Vasily Karpov and coded as "Project Savior," have been executed. Department X has also circulated false information stating that the asset is kept in "Cryofreeze," or flash-freezing induced suspended animation, in between missions. All members of Department X will adhere to "Cryofreeze" procedures when any one of the alters is active..."*

Bucky wakes up in a moving vehicle. His hands are clenched around a very impressive sniper rifle whose make and model he doesn't know. He's dressed in black combat gear like he always seems to be these days, and he's wearing the face mask that makes it hard to breath and even harder to talk.

He glances around the vehicle and sees two guards and one scientist, in addition to a driver. The guards are looking out the windows, and the scientists is scribbling something in a folder.

Relaxing his grip on the weapon, he slides the fingers of his flesh hand up and down its barrel. This is an intensely upgraded firearm, and Bucky hasn't held a gun in God knows how long. It nearly makes him shiver with how much power he suddenly wields.

He quietly flicks off the safety, and when one of the guards turns routinely to check on him, he narrows his eyes and stares the man down. Apparently that's pretty normal for the asset, because the man looks away, satisfied.

The confines of the vehicle are limiting, but he thinks he can kill both guards before they get their hands on the electric weapons that will turn his muscles to pudding and temporarily deactivate his



metal arm. He spends several minutes shifting very slowly and preparing to angle himself, and then one of the guards points out the window and says something in Russian that actually makes the other guard smile.

Curiosity trumping escape, Bucky follows the line of the first guard's finger, and looks out the window for the first time.

They're driving by a palace that seems to go on for miles. It's a soft green, and its windows are made of gold. There are columns that go up story after story to the roof, where there's easily a hundred statues of perfect stone people overlooking the city.

His jaw drops under the mask, and he looks and looks until they're long past the amazing building. Even then, he cranes his neck to see out the back of the vehicle, and he ignores the comments from the guards. He forgot that people take the time and effort to make things beautiful beyond whatever function they serve.

Steve would find this incredibly cool, he thinks. He remembers Steve bitching about how Europe looked nothing like it did in books, and they hadn't seen one good castle yet.

He spends the rest of his time awake hoping to see more through his window, and his fingers don't drift their way back to the trigger.

Whenever the asset isn't needed for a mission (which seems to be fairly often; Bucky estimates that they only send him on four or five kills a year), he voluntarily checks out and lets the others rise to the surface. Bucky certainly understands; being awake is tedious. There's nothing to do unless you're Yasha, who reads and speaks Russian. Lucky bastard.

Bucky spends his time awake listening to the radio, working out, and playing guessing games about what variation of bread and beef he'll get for his daily meals. The scientists had tried to implement a diet of colorless, nasty milkshakes which Bucky can guess were loaded up with nutrients, but even the asset helped them stage that particular hunger strike.

The scientists and guards leave him alone unless they think he's going to hurt himself or them. The threat of violence is always there, should he be stupid enough to try to get away from them, but it's rarely acted upon now. Bucky has ceased to be a problem to Lukin and his people, because he's nothing more than a sleepwalker when their precious asset doesn't want to be awake and bored.

And he does get bored. He never checks out during a mission, but whenever there's a stay, or he completes his objectives, he's usually done. It's how Bucky wakes up in the vehicle on the way back from a mission; Axel wakes up once in what he thinks is Ukraine; and Yasha wakes up in a helicopter, which is how they learn that Yasha doesn't like flying.

They come together to talk often. Something occurs to Bucky one day while he's telling them about the jobs he'd worked back in Brooklyn. Since falling off the train, the only people he has conversations with are either trying to inflict pain on him, or they're pieces *of* him.

"I'd probably go insane without you guys," he tells them honestly and gratefully. He's mostly just talking to Axel and Yasha; none of them really speak to the asset beyond what's necessary.

"Bucky," Axel tells him with a strained smile. "Think about what you just said." He does, and it takes him a moment before he gets it.

“Holy shit. I’m insane,” he says. “I-we are insane. They lock people up in loony bins for this.” It’s funny at the time, and he laughs a disembodied laugh that he can hear without feeling. Later, it’s one more reminder that there’s nowhere for him to go should he actually escape. This is the only place in the world where they know him and know how to handle him. Fuck.

Without formally agreeing, they all kind of lose interest in escaping after that. After all, there’s food here.

And a radio. That’s pretty nice.

### ***Winter Soldier Files 1960-1969***

*“...members of Department X should be aware that identities “James” and “Axel” are demonstrating efforts to learn Russian. Senior department members, including Comrade Lukin, do not know how they are learning. Thought-bleed between the identities has long been hypothesized, but all attempts at data collection have consistently proved that the identities cannot read each other’s thoughts. The most likely explanation is that “James” and “Axel” are learning through observation. All staff have been warned that there is a likelihood that these identities can now understand sensitive conversations, so all four identities should be treated as information-positive accordingly...”*

Bucky estimates, based on the sporadic information the asset shares, that his body is being used for an average of four assassinations every year. That’s an average of once a season, if Russia has seasons. It might be one long winter; he’ll ask Yasha that, and if there are seasons, he wants to know their vocabularies.

Assuming a four-season calendar, that means with every change, there’s blood. Out with the old in every respect. And maybe some of those assassinations aren’t on individuals but on couples or groups or even entire buildings of people. The asset said something about a bomb once; Bucky doesn’t want to know.

Fuck, there’s so much blood on his hands. Even if each hit took out exactly one person, that’s 36 people so far.

40 a decade.

64 by the time he’s fifty.

264 by the time he’s one hundred.

Or maybe a thousand, or a thousand-thousand by the time he’s one hundred. There’s no way to tell. Are they still your sins if your body does them but not your mind?

He groans and turns his face into his pillow. He doesn’t want to be awake now; he doesn’t want to be thinking about these things that he can’t change. He has no more control over the asset than he had over Steve; and the asset doesn’t ever get sick, so there’s nothing to bed-rid him and keep him from raising whatever kind of hell he puts his mind to.

The only way to stop him, Bucky knows, is take out the body which houses the mind. He thinks about pressing his face into the pillow and depriving his lungs of oxygen, but there’s a heart monitor surgically buried somewhere inside him. At the first sign of a drop, they’ll be in here, stopping him.

No point. There's never a point.

He takes a breath and turns onto his back, looking up at the light fixture until his vision is dancing with white spots. Then he idly looks around the room and lets the white spots sweep across familiar walls and furniture.

Department X has moved the Winter Soldier project, which is their grandiose name for the asset, out of the Red Room facility and back to Moscow. The cell here is pretty similar to the old one, which is ironic, because the asset rarely takes advantage of it. And he certainly doesn't give a fuck about sheets or books.

Bucky doesn't either most days, and he longs for the apartment in his mind where he'd rather spend most of his time. Bucky Barnes hasn't had a topside purpose in quite some time, but in his head, he can still learn and teach in equal measures. He shuts his eyes and goes there, even though he's narrowly missing out on mealtime.

In the apartment, Axel and the asset are sitting in silence. Axel is directing an imaginary orchestra with his hands, and the asset is watching the movement, either fascinated or pissed off.

"Talk me down again," Bucky says as he sits right next to Axel. They've never been able to touch each other in this projection, but he still doesn't want to cozy up to the asset.

They've also long since realized that there's no point in hellos or goodbyes in here. Their life is one never-ending conversation with voices fading in and out.

"Probably shouldn't do it in front of him," Axel advises with a side look to the asset.

"I don't care," Bucky tells him. "He's the problem. I feel like I'm drowning in blood, and we all know he doesn't care at all." The asset bares his teeth and scowls at him. Bucky glares back.

"What happened?" Axel asks to distract him.

"I was doing the math, adding up the numbers, and it's too many. It's so many people."

"It's not your concern," the asset says.

"It's my body! My fucking hands on the trigger."

"This is my hand," the asset says as he holds up his metal appendage. "It was created for me. Leave it."

"Bucky," Axel soothes, "don't think about the numbers. Just don't. You didn't think about them in the Army, and you can't now. Some of them probably even deserved it, just like in the war." Bucky imagines himself taking a deep breath, though they don't need air in here.

"They targets don't matter," the asset says, and Bucky loses whatever cool he was gathering.

"Fuck you; shut the hell up. You want to hear stories about Steve - you know what Steve would say if he ever met you?" Bucky snaps as he notices that he's now on his feet and pointing violently at the asset. "He'd be disgusted by you. He'd want nothing to do with you! He'd fucking kill you, even if you were wearing my face!"

"I wouldn't kill Steve," the asset says like it's anywhere close to what Bucky's getting at. Bucky throws up his hands and walks to the window that still shows his memories of the street outside.

Axel joins him.

“What brought this on?” he asks in a low voice. Bucky works his jaw back and forth before answering.

“They were hosing me down, and I looked at the drain, and there was blood and like...bone and brain and stuff. It was it my hair.”

“I wiped down after the hit,” the asset says.

“Not my fucking *hair*,” Bucky yells at him. Things go fuzzy and he fights to refocus. It’s hard to sustain the apartment when any of them feel extreme emotions. It forces them to be pretty mellow, otherwise they’d probably argue constantly.

“We agreed that you would clean yourself up after kills,” Axel is saying to the asset. “As long as it’s out of sight, it’s out of mind. You can at least do that for us.”

“I wiped down after the hit,” the asset restates angrily.

“*Not my fucking hair!*” Bucky yells again, and then he’s waking up. The newspaper sitting on the table tells him that it’s been two weeks since the shower incident, and he runs his fingers through his hair just to be safe.

Out of sight really is out of mind. He switches on the radio and searches for the station that always plays instrumental music.

Bucky wakes up some time later in another hotel room. This happens sometimes; when the asset finishes a mission, he tends to find somewhere out of the elements to wait for collection. He’s not really one for creature comforts though, so Bucky guesses that his guards choose the place.

The first thing he does when he gets up is flip the radio on. “*Police have a suspect, Lee Harvey Oswald-*” catches his attention, and he freezes with one foot in the air and nearly falls over, looking slack-jawed at the radio. He listens for another minute, getting his bearings, before letting out a curse and running for the window.

He throws it open, ignoring the silent air conditioner in his way, and looks frantically out at the street. Signs. Advertising signs and street signs and storefront signs – they’re all in English.

*Fuck.* Is he in America? Or somewhere else that speaks English?

He tunes back in to the radio broadcast, and hears slow, drawling syllables. It’s a bit twangier than his mind remembers, but he’d bet his other arm that it’s American.

Something beyond escape propels him out the door and down to street level. He’s already wearing plainclothes – slacks and a blue-striped button-down – which is helpful because he wouldn’t have remembered to change. Even his hair is slicked back. This is the asset’s “crowd” look, and Bucky uses it to walk among Americans in an American city. He’s been away for more than half his life, and he’s never been to *Dallas* like the signs say even once, but he’s compelled to move through the city, soaking it up. He doesn’t give a thought to Department X or his other personalities. He just walks.

He eventually finds himself standing in front of a bus terminal, looking at the schedules before he realizes what he’s doing. He’s being called to New York. He needs to go there.

That's about when it catches up to him what he's doing. Usually there are guards around when he wakes up in the time between a mission and the asset's return to the facility. He doesn't know where the guards are or why he's been able to get this far in the first place. There's no way he can actually do this.

Except, he realizes when he feels a wad of cash in his pocket, maybe he can. He pulls it out and notices that the asset has written directly on the top bill, "Brooklyn."

They're doing this. He knows they won't get away with this for long and he's not trying to properly escape. He wouldn't go somewhere so obvious if he were. He just wants to see it again.

No one bothers him on the bus, and he spends two days thinking about how and why the asset set this up. Somehow, he got rid of the guards, knew that whoever surfaced would be drawn to New York, and set it in motion. Why hadn't he just gotten on the bus himself?

A baby cries behind Bucky, and he thinks he has his answer. Ah, right. People. Not the asset's thing.

After the sign says, 'Welcome to New York,' Bucky can't stop jiggling his leg up and down. Please let him make it before they catch him; please let him make it.

He makes it. The bus lets him off in Queens, and he walks to Brooklyn, feet knowing the way even as his senses don't recognize most of what he sees and hears.

He keeps his eyes on the skyline or the ground, afraid that someone will try to talk to him. He'd made short, functional conversation with the ticket salesgirl at the bus depot and the driver of the bus, but he can't actually talk to a normal person. He has no idea what shit will spill out of his mouth if he starts. Russian, German, screaming, laughing...best not to try.

Brooklyn has an edge of un-realness to it. He has to keep reminding himself that he's actually here, and it's not the Brooklyn in his head. It certainly looks different enough, but as he loops through the familiar streets, he sees old haunts and street names that give him double-vision. On the one hand, he sees these modern people wearing modern styles and talking in modern slang. Music that he doesn't recognize flows out of stores; they don't get music like this in Russia. On the other hand, he sees ghosts of himself as a teenager and his friends who likely have their own teenage children by now.

He turns onto the street with the apartment, and modernity and ghosts merge. A thin, blonde boy is walking down the sidewalk with a long-haired girl. She has flowers in her hair, and he's wearing a leather vest and denim pants. Bucky stands still and lets them walk right by him, the boy's hand accidentally swinging out and hitting Bucky's hip. It isn't Steve, but he can feel his chest tighten all the same.

The apartment building's been renovated. He pulls back the corner of his mouth with bitter humor; the place he's been picturing for years, and has taught his other personalities to picture, doesn't quite exist anymore.

He buys an apple from a grocer and continues walking. It's nearly dark now, but most of the apartments and stores are well-lit. He relaxes a little in the dark; the fewer people who can see him, the less chance of someone realizing there's a monster in their midst.

Without meaning to, he makes his way out to the Brooklyn Bridge. Being able to see a huge piece of Brooklyn from far away is just as nice as being able to see little pieces up close, and he walks out to the center of the bridge before sitting and dangling his feet. He tosses the apple core into the

East River and imagines that he can see it ripple the dark water below.

Well, he thinks, this is it. He's seen Brooklyn again. He's seen his favorite places. He's walked his old paths. He doesn't need to go looking for any old friends or family, because he won't do that to them. He can stay dead to his ma and pop and Becks.

What to do now? Should he wait to get collected, or should he go back to Department X on his own? Or, maybe, possibly, he should jump into the East River.

The thought is a reflex; he's not even fully aware what he's thinking until he catches himself looking for boats and wind and trying to remember how deep it is. He's nearly stopped courting death because he always gets caught, and it feels very futile, but there's no one to stop him now, is there?

He grabs a cable and pulls himself up to the rail using his metal arm. The river looks wide and dark and very, very inviting. And it seems so perfect and right, somehow, that he die in Brooklyn.

He thinks about the asset paving the way for him to get here, and wonders again why he did that. He's not inclined to give favors, so he must have wanted something. He wanted something in Brooklyn that made him defy Department X.

What could he want in Brooklyn? Bucky thinks about all the stories he's told them, and then realizes that it's just that. He's fed all three of them on stories about Brooklyn and the life he lived here. The asset likes those stories too, as much as he tries to pretend that he doesn't like anything. He wanted...they wanted to come.

Bucky hesitates. Something in him still wants to jump, but they haven't talked about suicide in a while. He doesn't think it's fair to make this call without asking the other inhabitants of his body. And they probably really want to see Brooklyn. He lingers, and then gets down.

Returning to the borough, he uses the rest of his cash to get a hotel room for the week. In the event that Department X doesn't catch up to them, that should be enough time for the others to cycle through. He settles down on the bed and drifts under, letting the sounds of his city wash over him.

He wakes up on a table in Department X. He's covered in wires and nodes, and he can't feel a single part of his body.

The scientists standing in a half-circle around the table proclaim that it's the Американский, which sets off a fresh wave of shocks. He feels his slacks, the same ones from Dallas, grow damp and hot as he wets himself.

"You are stupider than I thought," Lukin says from somewhere behind Bucky's head.

"I wasn't running," he tries to say, but his mouth doesn't move right. It takes several minutes before he can try again. "I wasn't running," he says more clearly.

"There's no point in lying."

"I wasn't. I just needed to see it," he says. He doesn't include the others in his statement; they still don't think Lukin and his people know that they can communicate. And he's not going to throw the asset under the bus for this. Whatever he did, for whatever reasons he did it, Bucky owes him.

And he's never going to clue Lukin into the fact that the asset is capable of feeling something.

## ***Winter Soldier Files 1970-1979***

*“...modifications to the prosthetic arm befitting a Soviet super soldier. The increased strength of the arm necessitated anchoring it more securely to the asset’s skeletal structure, so the remainder of the shoulder was removed. The arm was attached to the asset’s left ribcage and fused in five places to the spine (see arm upgrade files). Nerve sensors are wired directly into the spine and surrounding muscles. At the request of Department X staff, the arm will still shut down temporarily when the asset’s body is “tasered” (see control techniques file) at 2 million volts or higher. It was recommended that this feature be removed and the arm be insulated from electricity, due to it being an obvious weakness which can be exploited; however, the asset’s handlers feel very strongly that it would be more dangerous to remove this failsafe shutdown in light of the asset’s four documented assaults on Department X staff.*

*The asset is not conditioned to pain in the same manner as the other identities, and did not resurface for three months after the arm upgrade. Information from the alter “James” indicates that the update “hurt like a motherfucker” and information from the alter “Yasha” indicates that the update “is like having your skeleton set on fire and also ground into pieces.” Comrade Lukin instructed that the asset be appeased via Department X’s fledgling Black Widow project under the ordinance of Alexi Brushkin...”*

Bucky wakes up strapped to a table, but the table is moving. He cracks an eye and looks around, and sees that he’s in a very small, shaking room.

In broken Russian, he asks what’s happening. One of the guards tells him that he’s being transported and also to shut up please. It’s strange that he’s strapped down for this; normally they transport the asset in a souped-up military vehicle, instead of strapping him down and loading him into the back of a truck. He wonders how many times he’s been moved like this, cars probably driving by on either side without knowing there’s a man trapped in here.

It’s a clear indication that the asset isn’t being sent on a mission. Bucky doesn’t think they would start him off like this; normally when they want him, they ask whichever identity is on top to call him out. Sometimes they ask with pain, but more and more, they just ask. It’s a different crop of scientists now than the ones who made Yasha and the asset. They see the asset as more of a legend than a science experiment.

His back twinges, and he grits his teeth. Lukin’s an old man now, but he’s still brimming with evil schemes, this arm upgrade being one of them. Bucky’s spine keeps trying to heal like a good serum-enhanced spine should, but there’s fucking metal bolts grafted into it. It’s still trying to reject them, four months later, and it’s an ever-present, low-grade pain. Well, his pain scale is kind of fucked up. Maybe the average person’s ten is Bucky’s two. Whatever; it hurts.

He asks the guards where he’s going, and when they don’t answer, he asks again and again.

“Дальний Восток России,” one of the guards finally tells him to shut him up. He asks what’s there.

“Красный зал.” His heart skips. Why are they going back to the Red Room?

Bucky and Yasha are trying to figure out the words to a song they heard on the radio a while back when the asset appears.

“Why are we in the Red Room?” Bucky asks him. He’s already told Yasha about the truck.

If it’s possible, the asset looks even angrier than normal. And he’s been especially pissy lately because of the arm.

“How should I know?” he answers.

“Because you always know?” Bucky tells him with an arched eyebrow.

“I thought you didn’t want to know where I go.”

“So we’re here to kill someone? At the Red Room? Um, yes please?”

“Might not be the same people who were there when he and I were made,” Yasha points out.

“I don’t give a fuck; let me at ‘em,” Bucky says with bravado.

“You want this mission?” the asset asks. He sounds like he’s hiding a smile under that muzzle.

“Do I want it?” Bucky laughs. “Seriously? Can I have it? I’ll glare and not talk to anybody.” There’s still an ember of rage burning deep down inside of him, and he fans it. Killing anyone in Department X is doing the world a favor.

“It’s yours,” the asset states.

Awhile later, Bucky wakes up in a bed. It’s a significantly nicer bed than he’s used to, even if the sheets are blood red. The walls are also blood red, as is the floor, and the ceiling. Charming, he thinks. Welcome to the Red Room. His skin is already prickling being so close to the place where they willfully broke him twice.

He gets out of bed to explore a little. It turns out that he’s not in a cell; he’s not even in a room. He’s basically in an apartment with a kitchen, a living area, and a huge, red bathroom.

He grins as he looks at the glass-doored shower. This is one of the few pleasures left to him, and he showers in blisteringly hot water whenever he wakes up in a hotel. They’re still fans of the cold hose technique back at Lukin’s facility.

He strips off the asset’s bulky black clothes and steps into the shower, assuming that someone will come get him for the asset’s mission, and he’ll just spend the day in here until then. The water takes a second when he twists the tap, but then it comes out hot and pressurized, and it’s amazing.

He shuts his eyes and opens his mouth and lets the water hit him in the face, washing off the kohl that the asset favors and the sweat and even the pain in his spine; that goes away too.

“Зима солдат?” a female voice comes from behind him, and he groans because he doesn’t want to have to get out and pretend to be the asset already. The shower door opens and he turns around with his teeth clenched so he doesn’t have to talk; his American accent will give him away. The asset doesn’t have any accent, as much as that’s possible.

There’s a young, red-haired girl climbing into the shower with him. She smiles shyly and Bucky’s brain whites out as she presses her naked body against his.

“Я был направлен в вы,” she tells him as she smooths a hand up his thigh and stomach, narrowly and deliberately missing his dick. She doesn’t elaborate and tell him *who* sent her.

If Bucky talks, she’s going to know something’s wrong, and he’s going to get the both of them in a



lot of trouble.

Or he could. Just. Go along with it. It's been...thirty years. Jesus. It's been thirty years. Part of him feels very strongly that he deserves something nice, and this dame looks like she'd feel awfully nice.

But it's the Red Room, and he's been touched by members of Department X before. He doesn't fully trust that she wants to be here and wants to be doing this.

This is one hundred percent the asset's fault. He doesn't quite know how, but he knows that it is.

There's no mission, is there? Or. Is this the mission? What. The. Hell.

He goes along with it, for a whole host of reasons. He's conditioned, and she might be punished if he turns her away, and he's always been okay with getting into skirts. Steve hadn't minded, so long as he didn't get attached to any of them, and at least one of them had to maintain his reputation as a ladies' man or someone would probably have started getting ideas.

He fucks her like a man possessed, doubting his ability at first but then, like a dam breaking, all of his enhanced blood flows straight to his dick. She makes little breathy moans, and he bites her neck and shoulders so that he won't start babbling. Somehow, they start in the shower and then end up on the table and then finally make it back to the bed. She's not much for kissing, and that's okay.

She curls against him when they've each come twice, smiling coyly and talking to him in Russian. He understands her just fine, but he doesn't talk back, using his eyes and body language to respond. As sated and sleepy as he is, he doesn't trust himself to close his eyes, lest one of the others show up and scare her to death. She finally slides out of bed and back into the black leather bodysuit Bucky hadn't seen before, and she leaves without a look back.

He lies amid the dirtied sheets, looking at the ceiling and wondering what the hell just happened.

The asset laughs at him when Bucky finally gets to talk to him.

"What was that?? Where was the mission?" he asks. "I thought you were supposed to kill some bastard in the Red Room??"

"You thought it was a kill. I did not say that," the asset replies. He looks happier than Bucky has ever seen him.

"What happened?" Yasha asks.

"There-there was a girl," Bucky stammers.

"A Black Widow," the asset adds. They both look at him. "A young, assuredly beautiful member of the Black Widow corps. The Red Room's new project."

"There's more of them? What are they doing with them?" Bucky asks, outrage relocating. The asset shrugs.

"Killing people? There's several of them. I assume you met Natalia."

"And *why* did I meet Natalia?" Bucky asks.

“She is my...present,” the asset tells him. “So they say. Really, she is a bribe. They want me to move past the humiliation of the arm and be more docile. So we have been brought here in the hopes that I will forgive Lukin and behave again.” Bucky hadn’t particularly been aware of the asset *not* behaving, but it’s always hard to tell with him. Of the four, he shares his outside life the least, and Bucky prefers it that way.

He does, however, have to know something.

“And why did you turn down your bribe?” Bucky asks. “Because if you think you played a trick on me, I assure you, I am not the loser in this.” The asset stops smiling behind the mask and shrugs.

“I sparred with her; she is talented. I have no need to go to bed with her.”

“I absolutely volunteer for this mission,” Yasha cuts in.

“Um, do you know how to go to bed with a woman?” Bucky asks testily.

“Yes.”

“No, you know from my stories.”

“I can do it!”

“The need likely will arise again,” the asset says thoughtfully. “We can try to send Yasha out.” Yasha beams at him. Bucky throws his hands up.

“Fine; Yasha can do it. I don’t want that guilt trip again.”

“Why did you feel guilty?” Yasha wants to know. Of the four, he’s the most innocent. The asset is just plain fucked up, and Bucky and Axel had to deal with Karpov. Of course Yasha doesn’t get it.

“Because I guarantee you she didn’t volunteer to be a Black Widow and kill people and fuck whoever they throw her at.” Yasha shrugs.

“It’s just sex. It’s fine.”

Yasha sees her twice, and then he’s singing a very different tune.

“I love her,” he tells Bucky. “We have to get her out of the Red Room.”

“Need I remind you that we have not been wildly successful at escaping the Red Room,” Bucky tells him sarcastically. He looks around for Axel to back him up, but he isn’t there. Axel hasn’t been around as much lately; sometimes they go deeper down. At least the others do; Bucky is too scared that he’ll disappear entirely.

The asset is laughing again. Perhaps this trip has improved his mood.

“We aren’t prisoners this time; we’re guests,” Yasha argues. “They wouldn’t dare treat the asset badly; Lukin would have their heads.”

“We still can’t smuggle out one of their assassins,” Bucky tries to calm him down. It’s difficult; Yasha is pacing back and forth.

“They’re hurting her! She knows they’re brainwashing her and she-”

“You *talked* to her?” the asset yells. Everything calms down when he gets mad, and Bucky and Yasha stare at each other. “They’re definitely going to kill her if she knows about you.”

“Believe it or not, she didn’t find it all that odd that the Soviet super soldier speaks Russian,” Yasha tells him. There’s a lot of emotions spinning around, and Bucky’s head is clouded with them.

This is one of the most frustrating parts of having several personalities. It’s impossible to control what the others do, and sometimes, like Yasha, they don’t listen to the others.

“She really is going to be punished if she knows she slept with someone besides the asset,” Bucky warns. “Don’t add an escape attempt on top of it.” Yasha scowls at them and ignores them until he fades away.

The next time Bucky sees him, he looks shell-shocked.

“I think I got her in a lot of trouble,” he says. His eyes are red even though they can’t cry in here.

“Oh, Yasha,” Bucky tells him sadly. “You idiot.”

### ***Winter Soldier Files 1980-1989***

*“...with the passing of Comrade Lukin, the last member of the original Department X team to create the asset is retired or dead. The new team is well-trained and already quiet experienced, however unforeseen complications with the asset arose...”*

*...while it does not affect the asset, it should be noted in the files that the identity “Axel” has not appeared to Department X for at least two years now...”*

Bucky doesn’t remember much about school. He remembers Dick and Jane readers, sitting at the front of the room so he couldn’t pull any of the girls’ hair, and the year they put Steve in his class. Steve had been a year older than Bucky, but a scarlet fever/rheumatic fever combo had knocked him back a year and into Bucky’s grade.

“Bucky, it’s going to be your job to help Steve if he’s too sickly to do something,” Miss McGillicuddy had told him very seriously (and why does Bucky still remember her name?) Steve had flushed with embarrassment, and Bucky had grinned.

She probably hadn’t been telling Bucky to follow Steve across Europe, killing anyone who tried to hurt Steve and taking out seven Hydra bases in the process, but events were set in motion.

Nor had she been telling him to pull Steve on top of him in the safety of their cushion fort and kiss him for every girl that turned him down.

Anyway, he thinks as he shakes himself out of the memory, worn through repeated remembrances and frayed by time, he doesn’t remember much about school. Once Steve had fallen behind another grade, Bucky was out, and only one person in his life was disappointed in him. Sitting still, doing figures, and reading books wasn’t for him any more than heaving crates around the docks was for Steve.

Sometimes it’s moments like these when he feels farthest from Bucky Barnes, even if they’re not bad moments. He flips the page in Братья Карамазовы and really hopes that Fyodor is going to get what’s coming to him.

“What does this word mean?” he asks one of his guards. The man clarifies, and Bucky goes back to his reading.

Captivity isn’t quite so futile when you’ve got stories. He understands how the others had craved his stories for decades until it got to the point where they remembered more details than he did.

The door to the cell opens, and the man steps in. Bucky doesn’t know what his name is; he’s replaced Lukin as head of the Winter Soldier project, but unlike his predecessors, he likes to watch Bucky from a little room with a video feed. They don’t interact much.

The man is afraid, though he pretends not to be.

Bucky looks up at him and marks his page. He grins at the man’s apprehension before closing his eyes and drifting under.

When he’s in the apartment, he’s surprised to see both Yasha and the asset. He quirks an eyebrow as he joins Yasha in leaning against a wall.

“Is Axel up there now?”

“I doubt it. I think he’s still deep,” Yasha tells him.

“I hope he doesn’t stay down there,” Bucky says as he rests his head back. The wallpaper looks out-of-focus; he tries to remember what color the stripes had been. “I miss the guy.”

Yasha nods, but he doesn’t know what it was like to be alone. Axel was Bucky’s first friend in hell, and they’ve been through things together that they still haven’t told the others. They probably never will.

“In that case, they’re waiting for you,” he says to the asset. He gets a glare in response. “I’m just the messenger. Go do your thing.”

The asset dismisses him and goes back to staring off into the middle distance. He’s sitting in the corner like normal, because it has the best line of sight to the rest of the room. Never mind that the room is imaginary.

“Go,” Bucky prods none too gently. He really wants to finish that damn book, and the asset has a job to do first.

Finally, the asset deigns to go topside, and Bucky rolls his eyes.

“The guard with the mole had a bruised cheek today. I’d say his wife slapped him.”

“Or his girlfriend,” Yasha points out.

“The girlfriend knows about the wife; he said that to the tall guard.”

“So?”

“So why would she slap him?”

“You two are ridiculous,” a voice behind Bucky says, and he turns with a grin to see Axel.

“Hey, buddy. Where’ve you been?” Axel sits at their feet and shrugs. He looks a little disoriented.

“...asleep,” he finally says. “Haven’t really had any need to be awake.”

“Come on, you can’t leave me with this idiot and the psycho,” Bucky tells him. Axel smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“There was a lot of anger in here earlier. Was it one of you?”

“Nah,” Yasha says as he shrugs and shakes his head. “Buck?”

“Nothing major,” he agrees. “Guess it was him. But when is he not a big ball of anger?”

“Something’s going on with him then,” Axel says with his usual discernment. Bucky thinks that he’d be a much better observation partner than Yasha.

“I’m sure he’s throwing another fit because they didn’t have his favorite brand of ammo or something.” Axel doesn’t look convinced.

“Tell me what’s been going on lately,” he requests.

“Lukin died,” Yasha blurts out.

“Who took over for him?”

“We don’t know his name. Some guy who wasn’t even alive when I was born,” Bucky reports with a testy laugh.

“What’s his game?” Axel wants to know. Bucky and Yasha look at each other.

“Knock on wood,” Bucky says, “but he’s not really that fucked up. Yet. Maybe he just hasn’t shown his hand. You want to go topside and check him out after the mission’s finished?” Axel shakes his head.

“I’ll hang back here. See what’s going on with him.”

Axel is weirdly prescient, and Bucky wakes up on a roof. The sun is bright in his face, and he’s dressed as the Winter Soldier. He squints at his surroundings, trying to figure out where the asset has dropped him and what he’s supposed to be doing. He doesn’t see any guards around, and he’s heavily armed.

It’s unprecedented; the asset lives for his missions, and he’s never abandoned one to the other identities before. It’s not so much that he likes them, although Bucky thinks he does take some pleasure in a good kill; it’s that he’s driven to complete them by something he probably doesn’t understand. But Bucky understands it; he’s the child of their (Bucky’s, Axel’s, Yasha’s) suffering, and the asset will always stay one step ahead of the trauma he doesn’t remember.

Except something’s wrong. Bucky can tell as he dodges a bold group of pigeons who feel very strongly that this is their roof. Bucky isn’t supposed to wake up with the trappings of a mission on his person, away from Department X and the soldier’s handlers. Something happened, and Bucky doesn’t have any of the memories of where this body’s been and what it’s been doing.

He turns back to where he was crouching when he woke up, and he sees that the asset has taken a page from the Hydra escape. Written in blood (Bucky checks himself for injuries but doesn’t find any) on a concrete wall that shelters the stairwell are the words ‘Вы должны скрыть.’

Hide.

Hide where? Hide from what? Is this point A or point B? Dammit, this is not a lot of information to go on.

He returns to the wall and flattens himself against it, wondering whose blood the asset had used to write the message. He checks his pockets, and there are many, for a message like the one the asset had written on a bill in Dallas. There's nothing. Bucky wants to strangle the asset's incorporeal projection.

He abandons the stairs as too easy and runs around the perimeter of the building looking for a fire escape. He's only six stories up, and he finds a rickety ladder that takes him down four stories to a platform and then another flight of stairs. He makes sure that the mask is covering and hiding his face, and then he scrambles to street level, likely scaring the shit out of any residents who look out their windows.

He jumps the last story, knowing the serum will protect him, and then he takes off at a run. His body is in shape, and it knows how to do all manner of stunts and tricks. The asset was trained well. Bucky just can't access that knowledge, so he uses the brute force in his muscles to run and clumsily jump over fences. He thinks of Steve telling him about the first villain he'd chased down after letting that doctor use him as a lab rat and turn him into something to throw at tanks.

He takes every back alley he can find. Wherever he is, they don't speak Russian and they have a lot of alleys. It's so cold that the mask is keeping his face warm by holding the condensation of his breaths against his face, and the people who do see him look at him with dead, uninterested eyes. One even drops to the ground with his back to Bucky, like he's expecting the asset to double-tap him right here.

This is fucked up. Bucky doesn't want to be the asset, even in costume only. The few times he's let people think he's the asset have always lingered with him unpleasantly, and now the people who recognize him just assume he's the angel of death come for them.

Bucky runs, eventually crossing out of the city and into the woods. He doubles back after about ten miles, reentering the city at a different point and stealing a car. The controls are on the wrong side; also he's driven a car exactly once, in 1937. This is a great plan, asset.

The signs are in a language that looks like Russian but different. He drives from road to road without a conscious destination, and if anyone's following him, then he hopes it looks like strategic swerving and retracing.

He roughly forms a plan to move himself as far as the gas in this car will get him, and then he's going to find a place to hole up and call the asset back. Or he's going to try to send Yasha out so he can give the asset a piece of his mind.

He'd picked a lucky car, and the gas in the tank gets him to nightfall. He's unsure if he's still in the same country or how many miles he's actually traveled. He finds himself in a town that smells like wood shavings, and he leaves the car near a frozen pond before heading back on foot for a cozy-looking shed he'd passed.

He breaks the lock and pushes the door shut behind him, making sure that he's the shed's only occupant before tossing the mask aside and crouching in the corner.

He closes his eyes and thinks of Yasha as he falls under. It doesn't always work, but sometimes it does; and he needs the asset to update him on the situation ASAP.

In the apartment, the asset is sitting in the corner just like Bucky had been topside. Axel is sitting next to him, being a steady, silent presence as far as Bucky can tell. Bucky starts forward, speaking through his teeth.

“What the hell?” he says. “Hide?”

“They know my patterns when I’m in the wind. You’ll have a better chance of getting away.”

“Who did I just get away from?” Bucky asks. “Also, Yasha? Probably not the person you want topside on a mission.”

“Department X,” the asset tells them. Bucky’s floored.

“We’re running from Department X? *You’re* running from Department X?” The words don’t make sense.

Then he gets a chill. Axel’s giving him a look that means Bucky has to tread very lightly here.

What’s so bad that even the asset wants to run from it? Department X isn’t the horror it used to be. Bucky gets to read Russian novels and eavesdrop on guards’ personal lives. Karpov and Lukin are gone, and their replacement doesn’t seem to be a shadow of the devils they were. This isn’t where Bucky’d *wanted to be* in the ‘80s, but it is *not that bad*. It is a bearable life, and it still feels like deliverance when he thinks about where he used to be.

So what’s so depraved that the asset is hiding from his masters, relying on his other identities to break his documented patterns?

“I do clean kills,” the asset growls. Bucky looks at him, waiting for more. He waits for several minutes. “They didn’t want him to die. They wanted information. That’s not my job, and they’re fucking idiots for thinking it is.”

“They wanted him to torture someone, Bucky,” Axel supplies like Bucky hasn’t already worked it out himself. He stares at the asset, looking into his seemingly dead blue eyes and wondering for the millionth time how the human mind works.

The asset is every evil thought that Bucky ever had, every moment of pleasure he took in a Nazi kill, every rage. The darkness in him that even Steve saw and followed with worried eyes is the earliest germ of the asset. This was in him, and Bucky can’t pretend otherwise.

But maybe there are tiny shards of Bucky’s humanity buried deep within the asset. He’s not a stand-up guy; he’s killed kids and bombed hospitals. He’s a bastard, and a psychopath. But sometimes there are these moments where he wants to hear about Steve, or he cares if Yasha’s incompetence gets Natalia killed, or he draws a line.

This is a line. Maybe it’s out of deference, maybe it’s out of disgust, but he walked (ran) away from torturing some poor soul.

“We’re fucked,” Bucky says what they’re all thinking. “And thank you.” The asset meets Bucky’s eye and grinds his teeth together.

“I’m not weak,” the asset defends himself from whatever accusations he’s barbing in his head.

“No one thinks you are,” Axel promises.

“It wasn’t the pain. Pain is immaterial. But that is how they made me. And to have me in your

head...”

Bucky waits him out again, and this time, he doesn't finish.

“So how exactly did it go down?” he asks to shift the subject.

“They asked; I said no.”

“Did you say no politely?” Bucky asks, already thinking ahead to damage control.

“I killed two handlers.” Of course he did; maybe Bucky was too quick to find a glimmer of a soul.

“Okay, so we're completely fucked. What's your plan? Where do you want to run to?”

“No plan; just evade capture for as long as possible so they see I'm serious.”

“I left Yasha in a shed. What country are we in?”

“Moldavian Republic.”

“I don't know what that is,” Bucky admits honestly. “Is that one of the little soviet ones?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Yasha might be okay on his own then. So keep moving, breaking each other's patterns, and, uh, who gets to talk to Department X when they catch us?”

“Maybe they won't catch us,” Axel suggests. They both round on him.

“You seriously think they haven't buried a tracker somewhere in us?” Bucky asks as the asset stares Axel down.

“You're facing them,” Bucky tells the asset. “I'll run you as far as I can get you, but you're not gonna hide in here and throw us to the dogs when they find us.” The asset nods once, and Bucky settles on his other side. They sit in a silent row and wait for their turns.

Bucky wakes up on the run two more times. Yasha's gotten them into East Germany, and Axel gets them West. Bucky picks up the torch and moves between old Hydra bases, and then the asset moves them to Spain. Yasha again surprises by getting to Morocco, and Bucky hugs the Algerian coast. The asset is in control when Department X catches them, and Bucky would be shocked if he took out fewer than ten agents before they finally overpowered him.

The man and his Department X scientists have been professionally weaned on stories of Bucky's torture, and they've seemingly been waiting to try out a few favorites. All four personalities end up rotating through the days of fire and electricity and blood, and Bucky had almost forgotten the solidarity of tag-teaming endless stretches of pain.

The guards take his books away, and he never learns what happened to the brothers Karamazov. But they also never ask the asset to stand in for them again, and that, Bucky thinks, is the only good thing he's managed to affect since Steve.



## ***Winter Soldier Files 1990-1994***

*“...the dissolution of the Soviet Union has wide-ranging consequences for the Winter Soldier Project. The XXXXXXXXXX has cut support to Department X. The Black Widow Project has been canceled, and the Winter Soldier Project’s funding is only guaranteed for three more years. Department X leadership has begun to search for a buyer for the Winter Soldier Project. Prospective buyers include Advanced Idea Mechanics, the nation of Latveria, and Hydra...”*

“I’m not telling him,” Bucky immediately asserts. Axel looks skeptical.

“The Soviet Union is dissolving? Into what?” The asset glares at them like he has so many better things to do than explain this.

“Free Russia? I saw one fucking broadcast.”

“Yeah, I definitely believe they’re okay with free Russia. That’s why things like the Winter Soldier project exist; to peacefully mediate the transition from a police state to a damn democracy. I don’t believe it,” Bucky maintains.

“What’s going to happen to us if it does fold?” Axel wants to know.

“Even if they call it something else, they’re not getting rid of things like Department X. Nothing is changing for us,” says Bucky. But he’s wrong, because he knows very little of the world outside his mind and his cell, and things are changing.

They get past telling Yasha that the Soviet Union is no more, and while Yasha says he’s glad, he goes deeper down after that. Axel stays around sometimes, but there are long stretches of time where it’s just Bucky and the asset.

When one of them is topside, it gets awfully quiet in the apartment. Bucky forgot what it was like to retreat into himself and not find anyone waiting.

Hydra buys the Winter Soldier. They don’t seem to give a damn about the red star on Bucky’s arm; they act like the Winter Soldier was their property all along, and he’s finally returned to them.

The asset accepts the transfer without much fuss. Handlers are handlers, and missions are missions. Bucky thinks that they should be upset, but in the end, he decides, they’ve just exchanged one evil organization for another.

## **WINTER SOLDIER PROJECT FILES**

**RUN**

**CODE 0100001101110101011101000010000001101111011001100110011000100000011011110110111**

**...**

**YOU ARE NOT AUTHORIZED TO ACCESS THIS REPORT.**

Bucky foolishly assumes that being Hydra property now means they’re going to Germany. He knows the Nazis were defeated, but no one ever told him what Hydra did after the war. He knows they partnered with Department X on at least one project on Russian soil, but he hasn’t exactly been keeping up to date with these things. Steve would be ashamed, once he got past the hundred

other ways that Bucky's failed his memory.

To his surprise, Hydra's gone international. And their main branch is located in...Washington DC. That's not what he was expecting, but he gets a thrum under his skin when he turns the radio on and hears good old American crooning.

*"Keep spendin' most our lives livin' in a gangster's paradise.*

*Been spendin' most their lives livin' in a gangster's paradise."*

Well. That's interesting. Bucky has some catching up to do.

Fifty years later, the prodigal son returns home to America, and he just wants a newspaper and some salty popcorn. Bucky practically begs the asset for his help, because he's hardly in a position to be making requests from their new handlers.

"No," the asset tells him almost immediately. "I already got your fucking radio. I have other things to do."

"Have you gone to New York lately?" Bucky asks him. "Has it changed a lot?"

"New York is off limits to the Winter Soldier," the asset says with a dark grin. Bucky returns it.

"Good memories."

For over a decade, the asset operates from America. He's been there a handful of times before, but the soviets had been much more interested in using him against internal threats. Now, suddenly, there's a new population of enemies for the asset to kill, and he's about as content as one would expect.

After the initial (and false) rush of 'home,' Bucky finds his days awake just as endless as before, maybe even more so. He isn't allowed to read, and there's no language to learn. His diet changes from bread and beef to bread and chicken. His American guards are caught up in the same family problems and affairs and addictions as the Russian ones had been.

It turns out that a basement cell in Washington is nearly identical to a basement cell in Moscow in every measureable way.

There's a new despondency, though. His body walks among the people that he fought and died for, and no one recognizes him. Bucky's wondered what sorts of posthumous medals and awards get heaped upon a fallen Commando, but they're obviously unimportant enough to be forgotten by now. He hopes that he's a footnote in a book about Steve somewhere, but it doesn't do a thing to change his days.

He doesn't exactly go deep, because he's afraid that he might not be able to get back up. As tired as he is, he's not completely turning over this body to the asset. It was his body first; he still *needs* to have some control over it, even if he doesn't particularly *want* to. But he does drift a little bit, ignoring the way the century changes and Yasha's rarely around and some of his guards talk about Howard Stark's son doing something or other.

The thing that shakes him out of it and really, really wakes him up for the first time in years is the asset being sent back to New York.

"I thought you weren't allowed there," he says off-handedly as the asset stands at the window in the apartment and looks out at a blur. Bucky honestly has no idea what image the window is

supposed to show anymore.

“This is a different kind of mission,” the asset tells him.

“How?” Bucky asks, stomach steeled to whatever grisly details the asset can mention by now.

“Aliens.” It takes Bucky nearly a minute before he whips his head around.

“What?”

“Aliens.”

“There are aliens in New York.”

“So they say.”

“And they want you to do...what with them?”

“Kill them.” Bucky makes a face.

“So whose side are the aliens on?” The asset sighs.

“There’s this guy named Loki. They say he’s an alien. And he’s going to bring more aliens. That’ll fuck up Hydra’s plans, so they want me to go to New York and kill them.”

“Aww, look at you bein’ a good guy,” Bucky coos.

“Fuck you. This is self-preservation.” He fades away, apparently done with Bucky, and Bucky sits by himself in the projection in his head.

He kind of wants to see New York. He hopes the asset wraps up this likely fake science fiction soon, and maybe he’ll let Bucky out to roam around a bit. He hasn’t seen New York since the sixties. He wonders if it’s changed much.

The asset’s anger when he reappears shakes the confines up their mind and rouses Axel and Yasha. He refuses to say anything until they’re all gathered together, their body asleep on the surface.

“Did something happen in New York?” Bucky asks. He fills the others in on the bare details he knows about the asset’s mission, because the asset abhors repeating himself.

“What did the aliens look like?” Yasha wants to know. The asset glares at him until he sits down. “What? No one else wants to know that?”

“SHIELD mobilized their own team.”

“What’s SHIELD?” Axel asks.

“The American Department X. Hydra controls it.”

“I thought you said SHIELD mobilized another team. But if they’re Hydra, and Hydra sent you...” The asset presses his palm against his eye socket as Axel trails off.

“Stop. Talking,” he orders. “I’m trying to say something.”

They settle down and wait for him. After assessing them and determining that they're not going to ask any more questions, he lets out a breath through his nose.

"They sent a team of enhanced humans to fight Loki and the Chitauri. They wore ridiculous costumes and fought ineffectually." His eyes go to Bucky's. "One of them was dressed like Captain America."

Bucky's jaw drops as they all react with little noises.

"No fucking way. They can't replace him."

"Maybe they replaced him back in the 40s," Axel suggests.

"No," Bucky says firmly. He clenches his fists and feels anger stir inside him like a dragon slowly waking up. "There's one Captain America. There's no other man for the job."

"The Americans sent someone out to fight in his uniform," the asset reiterates.

"Damn them!" Bucky hisses. His eyes feel hot for some reason, and he squeezes them shut to clear his head. "How dare they fucking do that to him. That uniform should be in a *museum*." He swings at the air, his anger finally catching and sticking. "It should have its own museum! This century is full of irreverent assholes." He steals off to the corner to sit by himself and sift through his rage.

Axel joins him before long. Bucky makes it clear with his body language and his eyes that he doesn't want company, but he sits down anyway.

"You okay?" Axel asks kindly, and Bucky ignores him. "Bucky, it's just a guy in a suit. The asset was really high up on a rooftop and busy shooting things. He probably didn't see everything; it could just be a guy in a red, white, and blue suit."

"He died for them," Bucky mutters. "When a guy like Steve dies...you retire the fucking jersey."

"It was ages ago, Bucky. Maybe they did retire it, and this generation brought it back." The words ring in his ears, and he shakes his head to clear it.

For all that he's faced the knowledge of Steve's death every day for many years, it still catches him off guard sometimes. There's a part of him that doesn't believe someone like Steve is capable of dying. That can't connect the idea of *him* to a pile of bones somewhere.

And he's thrown by the evidence that Steve's adoring country has just...moved on.

Bucky clearly hasn't moved on. He doesn't find it all that strange, but would Steve expect him to move on? Would Steve be horrified to learn that Bucky loves the grief almost as much as he'd loved Steve himself?

Because it's the only emotion that he can feel as sharply as he felt it before Karpov. Everything else has gone as fuzzy as the window in his mind.

He also doesn't know if he'd still be Bucky Barnes without the grief. He loved Steve for fifteen years, and he mourned him for seventy.

There's a lot of reasons why he pokes at the wound and doesn't let himself make peace with it. He thinks they're good reasons, and even if they're not, no one can take them from him.

But Steve wouldn't want Bucky to carry his death like a suitcase full of stones. He'd tell Bucky to leave it and find some peace.

"It was a long time ago," he admits. Axel smiles encouragingly.

Bucky feels like he's betraying Steve even as his whole body feels lighter. Muscles that he didn't know he had unclench.

"It was a very long time ago," he repeats. "And it doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"It matters in here," Axel tells him. "Out there, though..."

"He's gone. Like he never existed," Bucky finishes the thought. And maybe that's the scariest part. It's like Steve never existed. If all he amounted to in America's eyes was a guy to fill the suit, replaceable and temporary, then Bucky is the only existent proof that Steve had walked the earth.

And Bucky knows how very much he does not count.

"Steve," he exhales, treating it like the prayer it is.

And then he consciously, willfully, and painfully lets it go.

## Chapter End Notes

I am completely floored by how much support this story has been receiving. I have tried to respond to everyone's request and questions in the story itself, if I didn't already message you back. I feel self-conscious skirting around asking for feedback, but I really need you guys to know (and this applies to all fanfiction) how much difference it makes. A single comment can be the difference between, hypothetically, lying on my couch watching *Breaking Bad*, and turning off the TV saying, "Gosh, I really want to write more!" It always is appreciated, and now that I realize that, I try to be \*much\* better about leaving that feedback on other stories.

Other matters:

50s - The palace that Bucky sees is the Winter Palace in what was then Leningrad. It's beautiful, and I encourage you to Google it.

60s - Comic writers love to insinuate that their villains killed JFK. There's the Comedian in *Watchmen*, and I just saw *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, which hints at Magneto's involvement. I wanted the Winter Soldier to ride the Kennedy train, too.

70s - I'm not marking the story as "F/M" despite the fact that Bucky and Natasha have a sexual encounter. I feel that marking the story would misrepresent it to people who want to read *WinterWidow*, because this isn't that. And it won't happen again, no matter how much poor Yasha might want to.

80s - I know something is going around on tumblr about Bucky being a good student and a science nerd right now, but in the comics, he's a high school dropout. I chose to go with that variation because it makes a lot of sense that Bucky would have been more helpful to his family (and his best friend) if he left school and went into the work force. On a different note, the book he's reading is the famous Russian novel "The

Brothers Karamazov" by Dostoevsky and you should read that too.

90s - Bucky is moved to the States in 1995. The no. 1 song that year was Coolio's "Gangsta's paradise," so that's what he hears on the radio.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The name “SHIELD” gets to Bucky. According to the asset, SHIELD is the American version of Department X. It makes sense if they’re controlled by Hydra. They’ve recently turned out a knock-off Captain America in full patriotic gear and carrying, again relying on the asset’s intel, a replica shield.

In Bucky’s experience, Department X was willing to do anything to create their own super soldier. So what has SHIELD done to create the knock-off Cap and the other super soldiers on his team? And why the name? Is it a direct reference to Captain America?

After his talk with Axel, Bucky’s finally laid Steve to rest. He doesn’t let himself think about Steve’s reaction to SHIELD, or Steve’s reaction to the imposter, or Steve’s reaction to the damn *aliens*. Because Steve is dead, and his reactions to things will always just be Bucky’s faded memories and biased opinions.

But that doesn’t mean that he’s not curious about what the fuck his country is doing making more super soldiers. Schmidt was a disaster, and Bucky is a splintered wreck. Even with Steve to bring up the success rate, that’s still one out of three.

And *how* are they making them? The Department X recipe is a closely-guarded secret, and a glimmer of idealism possesses him to hope that the country of his birth would never go quite that far. That doctor’s formula is another possibility, even though Steve told him it was lost with the doctor’s death.

And he strongly suspects that Steve was lying about how much pain was involved. He thinks suffering must be a necessary forge in the super soldier process.

So he’s deeply angered by the team of enhanced humans and their red, white, and blue leader that this SHIELD has created for its own nefarious purposes. When the asset tells him that Hydra wants to dismantle and destroy “The Avengers,” his only reaction is, “Good. Make ‘em see that they should leave well enough alone.”

Bucky wakes up with his arms strapped to a chair of some sort. It’s leaning back, and a cold, metallic machine is gingerly clamped around his head. He hears the whispers of white-coats and guards around him.

“Bucky. Barnes,” drawls an American voice. Bucky blinks a few times to clear his swimming vision, but he’s tipped too far back to see more than a sliver of the man standing in front of him.

“Let me sit up,” he commands flatly, not really expecting it to work. A moment later, though, the chair is whirring and pushing him upright.

The man in front of him is sandy-haired with thick glasses and a three-piece suit. He looks out of place in the grungy...bank vault? The room where Bucky is being held.

“Alexander Pierce,” he guesses from the man’s innate authority. He’s never met the man, but the asset told them who was running the Hydra show.

“Bucky Barnes,” the man says again, “is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country.” It sounds like he’s reciting something from memory, and Bucky doesn’t even bother to correct him. Steve may have been a CO, but he was a Commando in every way.

He turns his attention to the machine that’s slowly whirring away from his head. It takes him a second to place it, but he recognizes it as similar to the machine Karpov had strapped him into. It had done something to his mind and made him drift – and Axel had slid into the gap.

It came back again later, too. He remembers flashes of this machine over several years. Is this... did this machine somehow create Axel, Yasha, and the asset?

“What the hell are you doing to us?” he growls, subtly testing his bonds. They hold. Goddamn super metals.

“I must apologize for the length of time it took us to discover you, Mr. Barnes,” Pierce says as if Bucky hadn’t spoken. “The Russians sent over quite a paper trail on the asset, and I do mean a paper trail.” He sounds annoyed.

“It took us a few years to learn whose body we were dealing with, but you could have knocked me over with a feather when I learned that you were none other than the war hero, James Buchanan Barnes. You’ll forgive us for the delay; literal rooms full of files, and you hardly look like your war photo anymore.” Pierce is leaning in familiarly, and Bucky wonders if he has enough leeway to bite the man’s face. He doesn’t like how he’s talking, and how it’s making Bucky feel.

“What the hell are you doing to us?” he repeats.

“Oh, the machine? It was an invention of my colleague, Vasily Karpov, with some modifications of course.” Bucky’s skin crawls at the name.

“Not your colleague. Old enough to be your grandfather,” he says darkly. Pierce opens his mouth, then pauses, flustered, at the correction.

“You are correct. I never met the man; his entire lab was killed in a mysterious gas leak, I suspect at the hands of your Department X friends, before I was...recruited. But his two crowning achievements survive; you, and this machine.”

“Are you trying to make another one?” he asks, letting his disgust at the idea show. Pierce laughs at him.

“No, I have no need for that. Do you have such little awareness that you think this machine creates alter egos?” He’s patronizing Bucky, so Bucky goes back to coiling his muscles in preparation to lunge at Pierce when he comes just a few inches closer.

“This machine wipes the subject clean. It’s been used many times, with great success, to create docile, impressionable subjects for Hydra’s important work.” Pierce looks at the machine lovingly, then turns the same look on Bucky. “There is only one subject on whom it never worked. At least, not as intended.”

Regrettably, Pierce walks away from Bucky, and Bucky is just as hooked as Pierce wants him to be. He waits for what will come next in the diatribe.

“Is it in your serum, Mr. Barnes, or in your own head that this resistance is based? Karpov’s personal notes show that he speculated on this subject at length. He noted that the serum didn’t manifest itself physically in you the way it did in Schmidt and Rogers. It gave you regenerative properties, which is why you’re alive today, and it perhaps affected your strength ever so slightly.



Not on the scale of Rogers, of course. But Karpov suspected that the serum took root in your mind, and that this is why they could never wipe you.”

He picks up a file from a counter and circles back to Bucky. Bucky notices that they’re nearly alone in the room now, most of the other occupants having filtered out.

“Or maybe you’re just a stubborn little cuss. For whatever reason, we do know that this machine can successfully disorient you, and that the disorientation is ideal for shuffling up the identities you have in your head. I wanted to speak with you, and the asset wouldn’t cooperate. So we strapped him in.”

“What do you want?” Bucky asks woodenly.

“To meet you,” Pierce says. “I was raised on tales of Cap and Bucky. I needed to meet you for myself, and to learn if you had any interest in helping your country become great again.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow and leans his head back. Whatever Pierce is about to tell him, he has no interest. Between the war, Yasha’s patriotism, and the way that he’s been used as a pawn for decades, Bucky is firmly against taking sides in any idealistic conflict. Any country or organization can be seen as the ultimate good or an evil that must be stopped, depending on the spin. It’s all spin and propaganda, from whatever side it comes from. The world is full of little people – Americans, Russians, even Germans and Italians – trying to do good for themselves and their neighbors based on how a few corrupt men and women define “good” and “bad.”

And he’s not stupid enough to be duped into participating again.

Sure enough, Pierce rattles on about American atrocities. Unjust takeovers and famine on their own doorstep and so much blood spilled over oil. With Bucky Barnes on their side, he says, people will follow Hydra, and when they take out the necessary world leaders, Bucky can help them shape the new future. An American Hero, risen from the dead and fighting for what’s right again.

There’s not a chance in hell that Bucky wants anything to do with shaping a Hydra-conceived future. Whatever his country or any country’s done, new world orders just sound like terrible ideas.

“Not interested,” he tells Pierce. The man scowls at him.

“Not even if Captain America were to fight by your side again?”

“Especially not then,” he says through his teeth. That seems to throw Pierce. Had the man really thought that it was the title that Bucky followed? The uniform?

Bucky followed the *man* inside the uniform, and he could have done without the title altogether. It just encouraged more shooting at Steve.

“Don’t call me out again. Whatever business you have, the asset is your guy. He can lead your damn cause.”

Except he won’t. The asset isn’t interested in power plays or leading people; he likes stealth tactics and weapons and hand-to-hand fighting. And even if they persuaded him to take up a mantle, he’s not an ideologue, and he gets bored easily. But Bucky would still rather that Pierce harass someone else about this.

Bucky closes his eyes and goes under, ignoring whatever Pierce is saying to him. He hears the

phrase “Captain America” again but has no idea what Pierce says after that.

The next time Bucky wakes up, he’s in a vehicle surrounded by a Hydra strike force, of which he gathers that the asset is both the leader and one who constantly has to be watched. He’s covered in gun powder and dust, smoke and fuel still clinging to his uniform.

One of the agents is making a report.

“I repeat, Fury is in the wind. Suspected escape through the sewers; send a team down to retrieve him.”

“Roger that,” comes a voice through the speaker system. “We’re indexing a list of locations where Fury is likely to go and listening in on all of them. Prepare the asset to move again when we find him.”

“I’m not the asset,” Bucky volunteers, just to see the agents’ reaction. Sure enough, every gun in the vehicle swivels to point at him, and even the driver whips his head around to stare.

“Code Cryofreeze,” one agent calls out. He sounds panicked, and Bucky smirks underneath the asset’s heavy mask. He’s really only familiar with the handlers back at Hydra HQ, and he’s never seen these agents before. He wonders if the asset has shifted personalities in their presence yet. His guess is no.

“Where’s the asset?” one demands, poking Bucky with the barrel of his gun. Bucky turns his head to look at the man and channels the asset in his glare.

“Don’t. Fucking. Touch me,” he enunciates. The man swallows.

“Excuse me, sir, who am I speaking with?” the agent to Bucky’s left asks. Bucky decides that he likes him. He turns his head again to look at him.

“I’m James Barnes,” he says, still with a little bit of a growl in case the other agents think they don’t have to keep their guard up around him, too.

“Isn’t that Bucky Barnes’s real name?” one of the agents mutters. Which is how Bucky realizes that, while Pierce learned his true identity, it’s not common knowledge throughout the ranks of Hydra lackeys. Pierce must be keeping that close, either because he failed to get Bucky to fight for Hydra or because he has some plan to use him down the road.

“Who is ‘Bucky Barnes?’” he asks, curious about what they know. No one answers him until the agent to his left clears his throat.

“Captain America’s sidekick in the war. He didn’t mean any disrespect, sir.”

“Who?” Bucky asks again, playing dumb.

“Umm, Captain America is this superhero who fought in World War II, and then he crashed his plane into the ocean. He’s back now, though. And Bucky Barnes was his best friend and sidekick. They led the Howling Commandos. He’s not back. He died somehow.”

“Fell off a plane,” one of the other agents chips in.

“Did you not finish third grade? It was a train that he fell off,” the driver criticizes.

Bucky stops listening after that. Here's some proof that Steve *is* remembered, despite the modern world's effort to revive Cap. These Americans know about Steve and Bucky and the Howling Commandos. They teach this in grade school. He feels dizzy with relief, and even though his resolution to let Steve go hasn't wavered, he feels...vindicated.

"What's Captain America's name? The original one," he asks, just to make sure.

"You mean Steve Rogers?" an agent asks him. And Bucky actually smiles.

"Are you gonna be any trouble for us, Barnes?" the one who'd poked Bucky asks, and he can't keep up the gruffness when he's so damn happy that Steve is *remembered*.

"No," he says honestly. And he isn't. He quietly goes back to Hydra HQ underneath an abandoned bank and lets them shut him in his cell until the asset is needed again to track down this Fury person.

It's only a few hours before they want the asset again. Fury's been located, and Bucky has no reason to stay around. He lets himself sink down and sends the asset to the top.

"People know who Steve is," he says to Axel when he finds himself in the apartment. "They teach kids about him." He still can't help smiling.

"That's good!"

"People know who Bucky Barnes is, too."

"Don't get cocky," Axel admonishes him with an answering smile.

"Nah, I'm famous," Bucky preens. He mimes smoothing his hair back and winking. Axel snorts ungracefully at his behavior.

"You're ridiculous. Calm down before your ego crowds the rest of us out." Bucky flops on the floor next to him, still grinning.

"I haven't seen you this happy in...shit, don't think I ever have," Axel tells him softly a minute later. Bucky shrugs. "And I know this has nothing to do with your 'fame' and everything to do with Steve's."

"They didn't forget about him," is all Bucky says. Axel lets him revel in it for a few hours before dousing his mood.

"You know this doesn't change anything, Bucky. Steve is still gone, and there's still a new guy in the suit."

"Yeah, I know," Bucky sighs. "But...he's got someone to live up to now. He knows who wore that suit before him, and all the responsibility that it entails." Axel is quiet for a minute.

"I should probably tell you...the guy the asset is supposed to kill is a known associate of the new Captain America."

"Oh," Bucky says. "So...do you think he'll be sent after him?"

"I don't know. It definitely seems possible." Axel looks at Bucky meaningfully. "And you did basically give him your blessing to kill the new Captain America. 'Make 'em see that they should

leave well enough alone.’’

“I know, I know,” Bucky says, and then lets out a breath. “I still stand by that. The sooner organizations like Department X and SHIELD realize that super soldiers aren’t worth the time and effort it takes to make them, the sooner they’ll fucking *stop*.”

“Okay,” Axel says like he doesn’t believe Bucky.

“I’m serious, Axel. I don’t care if the asset kills the guy in the suit. I’m not saying I want him dead, but if it happens, it happens.”

“Okay,” Axel says again. Bucky decides to ignore him. He thinks about how embarrassed Steve would be to have little kids learning about him and probably coloring pictures of him and-

Stop. No. Back away from that thought, Barnes. You’re doing it again.

He’s gone.

When the asset comes back to the apartment, he’s in a more talkative mood than Bucky’s seen in years. Normally he’s happy enough scowling in the corner until the others annoy him for information about Hydra or the outside world, but today, he wants to talk.

“I saw the new Captain America. The target was in his apartment,” he says. “He’s six feet, blonde, blue-eyes. He’s very strong – he can jump across buildings, and he can do some damage with that shield.”

“Did you fight him?” Axel asks.

“Are you listening to me? Six feet, blonde, blue eyes, built. He’s a fucking replica of Steve Rogers. They picked, or modified, someone to look just like him.”

“He’s obviously not identical,” Bucky says. “Remember, you’ve never actually *seen* him. I’ve just told you about him.”

“And Bucky’s no longer upset about them reviving Captain America,” Axel adds.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Whatever, you’re *less* upset, and you’re still fine with the asset killing him.”

“If he has to, then yes.”

“I do have to,” the asset says then. Neither of them replies. “That was the second thing I had to tell you.”

“Is there a third?” Bucky asks wryly.

“Yes.” They wait. “The new Captain America is a known associate of Natalia Romanova.” The name doesn’t mean anything to them, and the asset sighs like he’s so put-upon by their ignorance. “Natalia. From the Red Room. The Black Widow.”

“Fuck,” Bucky says at the same time as Axel says, “Yasha’s girl?”

“How is she alive?” Bucky asks after giving Axel confirmation.

"I don't know, but this isn't the first time I've run into her."

"What the hell?" Bucky nearly yells. "And this is the first you've mentioned it?"

"She interfered with one of my missions about ten years back. I shot her in the abdomen, left side, because she was blocking my target. I didn't kill her," he says like he deserves a gold star for it. "And then during the Chitauri attack, she was there."

Bucky rubs the bridge of his nose.

"So why are you telling us now, if you and she have such a chummy history together?"

"I didn't say anything out of deference for Yasha. She didn't recognize me when I shot her, and I suspect...I suspect they used Karpov's machine on her. I didn't want to hurt him." Bucky lets out a breath, trying to find fault with that logic but realizing that he'd have done the same thing. "Now, though, she's a target. Should we tell him?"

"No," Bucky immediately says.

"Yes, he deserves to know," Axel argues.

"He's deep anyway. He won't know until it's over."

"Look, I wasn't around for that, but--"

"Yes, you *weren't* around for that," Bucky snaps, "So you don't remember how fucking sad he was. This is doing him a favor. He already thinks she's dead, anyway."

"Or, maybe, the asset could *not* kill her," Axel argues. The asset sighs and looks at Bucky. 'Just figure it out and tell me what to do,' his expression reads.

"She works for SHIELD, right? So she works for HYDRA."

"So do we!" Axel argues, pointing at the asset. "And the fact that Hydra wants her dead seems to indicate that she's probably doing some good."

"You've never cared about that before," the asset accuses. "Why do you care about this girl who you never even met?"

"Because *Yasha* cares about her, you bastard. Bucky had Steve, and Yasha had Natalia. Those are the only people any of us have loved, and we don't fucking kill them!"

Bucky flushes at Yasha's words. The others obviously know about him and Steve, but Axel's words are the most any of them have ever acknowledged the nature of the relationship between Steve and Bucky. A handful of Bucky's stories are just for him, and while the others can read around the edges of what he doesn't say, they never talk about it. He doesn't know if they're uncomfortable, or if they could tell that it would be too painful for him.

"Yasha was with her for a week, and she thought he was me. It's hardly the same thing," the asset is arguing when Bucky tunes back in.

"Just- if there's a way to leave her alive, do it," he tells the asset. "If it's you or her, kill her. We'll figure out what to tell Yasha when it's done." The asset nods. They sit in uncomfortable, angry silence until Axel floats to the surface and leaves the two of them alone.

Later, the asset returns to the apartment and switches out for Axel again. He looks at Bucky strangely for a moment before sitting down.

“He called me Bucky,” the asset says, and Bucky’s heart races before he forces away all of the pointless hope and goes for the simplest, truest explanation.

“I didn’t think anyone would recognize my face. The Hydra handlers didn’t. Maybe they put him through, like, intense “Captain America” training?”

“Yeah,” the asset says. Bucky looks at him, seeing what the new Captain America would have seen. He can still see his features under the asset’s permanent, hard expression, but the dead eyes and the set jaw change the shape and color of his face. He’s also worn and has a permanent dirtiness to him that their handlers can never wash off. And, of course, his hair is different than it would look in any textbook.

But the man had recognized him. He must be quite the student.

“What’d you say?” Bucky wants to know.

“I asked him who the hell Bucky was to distract him. And then he and the Widow tried to kill me, so I didn’t really have time for follow-up,” he says testily.

“Did you kill them?”

“Not yet.” The asset takes a breath. “Pierce thinks I have no fucking clue who Captain America is. I told him I knew the man on the bridge, and he got mad and used that machine on me to bring Axel to the surface. I think he wanted you, though.”

“I wonder why they’re scared of you knowing who he is,” Bucky muses aloud.

“They’ve always been afraid that there’s a little too much you in me,” the asset responds. Bucky grins.

“Now that’s funny.” The asset doesn’t smile back. He’s quiet for a few minutes before speaking again.

“Hydra really wants the captain and the widow dead. They’re after them right now.”

“Do you think there’s any merit in what Axel said? About sparing her because of Yasha?”

“Maybe. But you said it was okay if it was me or her.”

“What do *you* think?” Bucky asks, and the asset shrugs. “You don’t have an opinion?”

“I think...it’s out of our hands if Hydra wants her dead.” Bucky nods.

“But you do want to spare her,” he realizes, “otherwise you’d never have said anything.” The asset stares at him for several seconds before looking at the wall.

“I’m not bothered by the loss of human life,” he finally says. “If not me, it will be someone else who takes them out. When you are marked by an organization like Hydra, you’re as good as dead. I am just a means of getting there.”

“You once asked me if I would kill Steve, were he still alive,” he continues a minute later. Bucky doesn’t remember that conversation. “I told you no, because Steve matters. I think Axel’s right about that. Not many people matter, except the ones that you three have decided to care about.”

Bucky looks at the asset with wide eyes.

“I highly doubt I have the capability to care for anyone. But if one of you cares about someone, and I have to live with that pain inside here,” he says as he waves his hand around, “then they matter. So no, I would not choose to kill Natalia, but I can’t save her from Hydra’s hands.”

“Okay,” Bucky says after a loaded pause. “You should probably tell that to Axel. I think he’s still mad at us for being heartless bastards.” The asset smirks.

“I’m probably going to get called up again soon,” he says sometime later. “Whatever Hydra’s doing, it’s big. And the new captain is at the heart of it.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. “Let us know if you permanently change the world or anything. Pierce was babbling about something on a huge scale.”

“I highly doubt anything Pierce or I or even all of Hydra can do will permanently change the world. There will always be men like him, with weapons like me.”

“Well, let me know about any small-scale changes then. You know how much I hate being out-of-touch,” he jokes.

For them, the world does change after that, and it is both a massive and a permanent departure from the life they’ve been stuck in for decades.

The next time Bucky wakes up, he’s in the midst of a lot of noise. He looks around. He’s on some sort of aircraft, but it’s falling out of the sky. Pieces are flying off and blowing in the wind and plummeting down to water below. He aches, and his fist is raised.

He looks down.

Steve is battered and bloody beneath him. He’s looking up at Bucky with trust and sadness and defeat in his eyes, and Bucky makes the connection between his raised fist and the swollen eye and bloodied lips and-

The floor falls out from under him. Bucky grabs for Steve, but barely manages to catch himself on a beam. He watches Steve fall, unmoving, Bucky’s brain still frozen at the point where he’d woken up and seen the face he knew could not possibly be here and now before him.

But it was Steve. He has no idea what’s going on, what the asset is doing, and why Steve is here, but his instincts kick in.

He lets go and falls after Steve.

He sees him hit the water along with metal beams and other pieces of debris from whatever they were fighting on.

He twists in the air to land feet-first, and some sensory memory in him remembers the hopeless, flying feeling from falling off the train all those years ago. He doesn’t have quite as far to fall, and he’s not panicked this time. He’s completely in control of his body as he chases after Steve, barely trusting himself that it *is* Steve but ready to hurt, ready to die if he has any chance of saving him.

He breaks the water feet-first, jolting his legs painfully but slicing through the surface of the water like a bullet. Objects hit the water’s surface around him; some of them sink and some of them

float, but Bucky is aimed and, spear-like, shoots downwards.

He sees a glimmer of red and white through the murky water. Steve's ahead of him by about twenty feet, and he's been submerged for less than thirty seconds. Bucky spreads his legs and propels himself to Steve.

It's like riding a bicycle. His body fixes on Steve and pulls itself in, magnetic and unquestioning. Get to Steve. He grabs the body with his flesh arm and uses the metal one to pull himself up and out of the water. He registers faintly that the arm isn't moving properly, and it kind of hurts, but he disregards that as unimportant.

They break the surface right in the middle of the debris site. A twisted piece of metal crashes a foot away from Steve's head, and Bucky swears. He pulls Steve's body against his own, Steve's back against his stomach, feeling the waterlogged nylon stick against his own leathers.

Steve is unconscious and unresponsive. Something else crashes down behind Bucky, splashing them both. They're going to get hit if they don't move. The entire aircraft is going to come down on them. Fuck.

Bucky turns Steve so that they're facing, churning his feet to tread water the whole time. He kicks Steve's motionless legs by accident, and he knows that the best way to get away from the debris is by going under the water.

But Steve can't hold his breath. He probably already has water in his lungs.

Holding Steve with his metal arm, Bucky uses his flesh hand to pinch Steve's nostrils together. Then he takes a deep breath, fits his mouth over Steve's, and exhales it into his lungs.

Or at least, he thinks it goes into Steve's lungs. Distant snippets of learning to do this in the Army filter back to him. Tilt the guy's head a certain way, or the air will go into his stomach. The neck needs to be at a certain position to get the air into his lungs.

Well, fuck that, he has no time and they are *in water*. He does it again, not letting his mind catch on the way Steve's lips are soft underneath the heat of the bruising. The way they're chapped ever so slightly, and Bucky's own chapped lips want to scrape against them, but the water makes things smooth.

His body wants to react. From giving mouth-to-mouth. In the middle of a rescue mission. Where they are most certainly going to die if he doesn't get Steve to safety, and get the water out of his lungs, and wake him up.

He clamps a hand over Steve's mouth and nose, takes a breath for himself, and dives under. Steve is heavy and their natural buoyancy fights against them, but he drags them several feet below the surface using the metal arm and the power in the asset's muscles. Seconds later, something blots out the surface where Bucky was just treading, and he says a small prayer of thanks as he drags Steve toward the land he'd locked onto earlier.

A prayer of thanks. That's...not something he's had any need for in lifetimes. And it trips through his mind like muscle memory, rote and automatic.

Steve starts to struggle when they're almost at the bank. He doesn't seem to have regained consciousness, but his body recognizes that something is holding his mouth and nose shut. His body wants to breathe, but Bucky can't let it, because he'll breathe in yellow water that's now certainly laced with fuel, if the huge shockwave of water that pushes Bucky and Steve the last



thirty feet is anything to go by. It drags them further under, but then Bucky surfaces, Steve gasping the second that Bucky lets go of his face.

He sees the entire aircraft slipping underwater at a tilted angle, the sky finally free of mechanical pieces but the river junked with them. Fearing electric shock, Bucky gets his feet under him and scrambles up the slope, using the metal arm and the adrenaline to swing Steve into his arms and hold him above the water as he trudges to shore.

He's holding him bridal-style, and he remembers the last time he did this. Steve had been unconscious then too, so weak from dehydration and swollen to the touch.

Bucky had really believed that he was dying. Hadn't cared one bit that people were gawking as he ran through the streets, carrying Steve and begging someone to call ahead for them. And Steve had woken up mere blocks from the hospital and demanded to be put down.

The stubborn little ass.

But he's not waking up right now.

He drops Steve probably harder than he should, because Steve is heavy. Without the water around them, he can see blood leaking from holes in Steve's uniform. There are three on his chest, and he can't see Steve's back.

"Oh, God. Asset, what did you do?" he breathes, wiping the hair out of his own eyes. He gets to his feet, dripping wet and trying to remember how to do real mouth-to-mouth. But he can't grab hold of it. It's not something he kept. And Steve is sprawled where Bucky dropped him, his chest not making any movements besides the continual ooze of blood.

He sinks to his knees next to Steve, wondering if he'll do more harm than good. He remembers the stomach thing again, and blanches.

Regroup, Barnes, he tells himself. He isn't alone. He can never *be* alone; which one of them knows how to do this?

The asset doesn't; it's not his modus operandus to keep people alive.

Axel is usually good in a tight spot, but Bucky doesn't know where he'd have picked this up.

Yasha...Yasha has army training at least a decade more recent than his own. Yasha's the most likely to know this. He scrambles on his body for a pen or a marker or anything, but there's none. He grabs one of the knives from the asset's thigh holster, hoists up the cuff of his pants, and slices probably deeper than he needs to. Throwing away the blade, he dips his metal fingers in the warm, stinging cut and raises his index finger to an unbloodied spot on Steve's blue pants.

'Help him,' he writes, and then immediately shuts his eyes and falls downwards.

In the apartment, the asset is standing motionless. Bucky races around the room, not sure who he needs to see.

It's just him and the asset.

"Where's Axel? Did he just go up?" he gasps, frantic. The asset turns wide eyes on him and nods.

"Bucky, I think--"

“Shut up, we need Yasha. Help me!”

“The man in Captain America’s uniform, he looked at me like he knew me-” Bucky barrels toward the asset.

“You were telling me just the other day about how you’d help us save the people we love. Help me now – help me find Yasha!” The asset stares at him for a moment, and then opens his mouth and yells, louder than Bucky has ever heard him, “*Yasha!*”

“Yasha!” Bucky yells, running at the walls and letting his body crash against them without feeling it. He pounds on every available surface, feeling the apartment go a little crooked as they scream and stomp, trying their damndest to pull up Yasha from the depths of their mind.

“Yasha!” they scream over and over again, before he’s there, confused and bleary-eyed. Bucky grabs for him.

“Do you know mouth-to-mouth?” he asks, the asset standing behind him.

“*What?*” Yasha wants to know.

“For drowning victims! Tell me they taught you that in the soviet army!” Yasha shakes himself, not unlike a dog.

“Uh, yeah, a little.”

“Go out there, then! I need you to help Steve.” Yasha’s jaw drops. Then he looks at Bucky sadly.

“Bucky...you know that Steve is dead. What’s going-”

“It was Steve. He talked to me. He said he was with me-with Bucky-until the end of the line,” the asset interrupts.

Bucky’s stomach drops at those words. They all know those words – Bucky’s recited them more times than he can count. There’s not a lot that could have convinced the asset that he was dealing with the real Steve, but that, apparently, was one thing that could. “So I dropped back and let Bucky handle him.”

“Please, Yasha,” Bucky begs. “Go up.” Yasha looks at him for a beat longer and then closes his eyes. A minute later, Axel is standing in his place.

“What the hell did you expect me to do?” he asks, stumbling forward. Bucky is too agitated to explain, but he asks, “How is he?” before Axel catches his balance.

“He’s motionless, but he had a pulse. Who shot him?” The asset must make a move behind Bucky, because Axel says, “We did?” He turns back to Bucky.

“I thought you said you were okay-”

“It’s Steve,” Bucky breathes, “Axel, it’s Steve. I don’t know how, but it’s actually him. We have to help him.” Axel looks dumbly at him.

“Axel, promise me you’ll help him. I already have his word,” he says as he points back at the asset, “Please give me yours. Please, please just trust me on this and help me, Axel,” he begs.

“Yes, Bucky, yes of course, sit down,” Axel tells him, and that’s about when Bucky notices that

his entire projection is shaking. He looks down at himself and he's a faint, jittery outline, gasping for breath in an air-less, breathing-less environment.

"Fuck, what's happening to him?" he hears the asset ask, and it sounds far away.

"He's having a panic attack or something," Axel replies. "Bucky. Bucky..." His vision blacks out, and he doesn't remember anything after that.

Bucky doesn't exactly wake up, but he comes back to himself some time later. He's slumped against the wall of the apartment, and Yasha and the asset are looking at him.

"Hell of a time to go deep," Yasha scolds him, and Bucky groans and looks around. "He's okay. Really," Yasha adds, and Bucky has a second of confusion before it hits him what Yasha's talking about.

"Steve!" he yelps, struggling to his feet. "Yasha, did you get to him? Is he breathing??"

"I told you he was okay," Yasha says. "And I'm not telling you any more until you calm down." The asset raises an eyebrow as Bucky lets himself pitch forward, leaning his forehead against the wooden floorboards that don't splinter here, and forcing his racing thoughts to slow down.

After several minutes, he lifts his head. They're both staring at him warily.

"Is Axel with him now?"

"Kind of. He's in a hospital," Yasha tells him. "Axel is observing but not interacting."

"And he's okay?" Bucky asks, needing the clarification for the third time.

"Yes, he is," the asset growls. "Onto other matters, our arm is fucked up, and Hydra might not exist anymore."

"Okay," Bucky says, not really caring.

"That's kind of a big deal," Yasha reproaches. "Who owns us now?" Again, Bucky doesn't really care. Satan himself can own them, just as long as Steve is okay.

"If Hydra does still exist, they're going to kill him," the asset says, and suddenly, Bucky is very interested in what they have to say.

Bucky trades places with Axel when it's been decided that he can handle it without freaking out again. He feels calm enough, but then again, he'd felt calm while he was with Steve. It was only when he turned him over to Yasha and he was locked, unable to help, in his mind that he'd lost it.

He thinks of what he knows about panic attacks from the war. He's seen men get them from terror and from trauma. It doesn't really surprise him that he's fucked up enough to panic from... happiness.

Or maybe this is a kind of terror. The terror that he's seeing something that isn't there, and that Steve isn't actually back. Or the terror that Steve's come back from the dead, only to die on Bucky's watch.

He still feels tremors of it, even as he wakes up on a rooftop and sees a pair of binoculars clenched in the metal hand. Lifting the binoculars to his face makes the arm scrape against the artificial shoulder, and something in his spine shifts. One of the bolts, maybe. Has it gotten worse since the river, or was Bucky so singularly focused that he had no idea?

The binoculars show him Steve's hospital room, blue-walled with a curtain divider hiding Steve's bed from the doorway. He can see Steve lying in the bed, motionless except for his hand, which is reaching out for someone who's just entered.

A tall, thin red-headed woman enters the room. It isn't Natalia, is his first thought. Her hair is lighter, she has bangs and freckles, and she's graceful but not dangerous. She's dressed in a very nice suit that shows off her legs to their fullest advantage. And she's grasping Steve's outstretched hand happily, visibly cooing over his bedridden status and likely saying something about how glad she is to see him looking so good.

Bucky hates her on principle. Except he has no right to, because Steve obviously isn't his anymore. Even if he cleaned up and walked into that hospital room without being stopped by the SHIELD handlers who must be stationed outside of Steve's door, he has no idea how long he could hold it together in front of Steve.

An hour? A day? Maybe a week?

And then he'd break again. He would run out of juice, drained by the effort of acting normal and happy for Steve, and, without meaning to, he would fade and someone else would rise to the surface.

On the whole, Bucky doesn't think of himself as a Jekyll, although the comparison has struck him before. His alters aren't evil; not even the asset, although he's not by any stretch a good guy either. He's not worried about what havoc they'll wreak, and he actually trusts them to work in each other's best interests no matter who is on top.

That doesn't mean that Steve can ever know. Steve's first thought would be to get Bucky help, to *treat* him and make him *better*. And it would probably come from a place of love and relief, too. It's not Steve's fault that Bucky's head is damaged. That he's sick and deranged and broken.

And Bucky knows that you don't heal from what he's got. He's like a mirror, cracked into four. If you clear away the other three pieces, you sure as hell don't have a whole mirror. It functions a lot better when you keep the pieces and make do with the cracks.

But Steve won't see it that way. No one will. And Bucky can never let Steve see those cracks, because he already knows that the pain and shame in Steve's eyes will wound him deeper than Lukin ever did.

It's good that Steve has this friend. Maybe a girlfriend. Maybe even a wife. Bucky wants that for him; he's always wanted that for him. A wife and kids.

A son named James, maybe. That would definitely be something Steve would do.

The binoculars blur, and he notices that his eyes are moist. He puts the binoculars down for a moment, blinking rapidly and forcing his eyes – and his thoughts – to clear. If he can't handle this, he's going to go back under. If he gets it together, he can spy on Steve while he talks to this woman, and eats some dinner, and drifts to sleep with the bluish light from the television drifting over his face.

He picks the second option and pulls himself together. There's no excuse to act like he's been acting. He's a grown man – an old man, actually. And he's overcome what must have been hundreds of small deaths from exhaustion, from blood loss, from broken spines and skulls, from burns...he should be strong enough to deal with this.

He watches the window through the night, after the woman leaves and after Steve eats pudding. A black man comes to sit by Steve, and ends up falling asleep in the chair, and Bucky goes through the same process from earlier: Jealousy, and then anger at himself for wanting to deny Steve anything.

The next morning, a blonde woman comes to visit Steve, and he does it again. It's exhausting, going through the steps of acceptance for every non-medical visitor that Steve has. He can't actually be sleeping with *all* of these people; Bucky has to get a grip.

Steve is taken away by the doctors shortly before noon, and Bucky can't follow him into the hospital. Feeling useless, he sets the binoculars down, and closes his eyes to fall under. He's sure that he's been away long enough for the others to talk about him and come to a conclusion about how they're going to handle him and this.

He knows, though, that if they've decided to prioritize anything other than keeping Steve safe, then they're going to have a problem.

All four of them are in the apartment, which means his body has fallen asleep. He realizes, faintly, that he had felt incredibly exhausted on the roof.

"How is he?" Axel asks, and Bucky briefly reports on Steve's coloring and his visitors and what he'd eaten and how much he'd slept.

It's possible that his report isn't actually brief.

"Are you okay seeing him?" Yasha asks, and Bucky tries to convey a confidence he doesn't feel.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I don't know what that was, but it's passed."

Axel totally doesn't believe him, Bucky can tell, but he commands their attention and leads the meeting.

"Okay, are we on the rooftop still?"

"Yeah," Bucky says. The asset scowls at him.

"Get us to cover next time."

"I'm sorry; I just assumed one of you were taking over," Bucky says, not without some attitude.

"It's okay for now," Axel interrupts them. "We need to talk, all four of us, about Hydra and Steve. And what we're going to do." He looks at Bucky reassuringly.

"I checked media sources – the news, newspapers, even stole someone's phone and used the Internet." Bucky's heard about that before, but he doesn't really know what it is.

"Apparently Hydra was hiding inside of SHIELD, so most of the country and SHIELD were unaware of Hydra's actions, much less their existence. Captain America led a team that stopped

them from assassinating hundreds of thousands of people.” Bucky’s jaw drops a little at that.

If anyone could save that many people, though, it’s Steve Rogers.

“So right now, both SHIELD and Hydra are in pieces. They’re not very organized; we’ve gathered that a core group of SHIELD is rebuilding and protecting Captain America. There’s not a lot of them, though, and they’re busy, so we think Steve’s in danger.” Everyone looks at Bucky then, as if making sure that he isn’t going to outburst.

“No one’s really sure what Hydra is doing, but the asset thinks that recovering us is a top priority, as is killing Steve. He seriously fucked with their plans, and they like their revenge. Oh, also Pierce is dead.”

Bucky processes all of that, and then takes a deep breath.

“Okay. So where does that leave us?”

“They’re going to want to collect or kill the asset, but we have some advantages. First, we think the tracker is in the arm, because it isn’t working. No one’s found us in over a week.” Bucky can barely believe their luck with that.

“Second, the arm is a serious issue. Not only does it hurt, but it’s malfunctioning. At best, it’s useless. Realistically, it’s probably doing damage to our body. And at worst, it’s going to kill someone, maybe us.”

“Great,” Bucky says. That’s where their luck ends.

“And then there’s Steve. He’s been getting stronger and more responsive ever since Yasha got him to the hospital. We think he’s going to be released soon, and his address was leaked in the Hydra reveal. We don’t think he’s stupid enough to go back there, though.”

“Um,” Bucky says, feeling a phantom headache. “He really is.”

“I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this before,” the asset tells them, “but Steve is crazy. He stopped fighting me on the helicarrier and basically gave me permission to kill him. It does not surprise me that he’d go back to his leaked address.” Yes, definitely a headache. Oh *Steve*.

“So we basically have two choices. We can go back to Hydra and do whatever we can to keep Steve safe there, which isn’t a lot, and get the arm fixed. Or we can keep off Hydra’s radar, keep an eye on Steve, and, well, we don’t really have a contingency for the arm with this plan yet. Bucky, do you see any other options?” They all look at him, and he swallows and shakes his head.

He knows which plan he’s going to vote for, if that is indeed what they’re doing. He just doesn’t know what they’re going to say. The asset did say that Steve mattered, but he’s also never been without masters to control him. Axel did promise to help Steve, but Axel is a pragmatist.

He feels a very real coldness in his gut, despite being inside his mind. He has a horrible moment where he knows he’s going to be outvoted.

Then Axel smiles at him.

“We voted unanimously for option two. No one’s sure why Steve is alive, but we want to keep him that way. We kind of got attached over the years. And we don’t know what would happen to you if he died again.”

Bucky is floored. He can't remember ever being so overwhelmed with gratitude and with relief and maybe even with love for these broken and patched pieces of him.

"Vielen dank. Ich habe keine worte," he mumbles to Axel, because he doesn't believe for a second that Axel didn't spearhead this. Then, to the others in English, "Thank you. I don't have any words."

"Let's strategize," the asset says, eager to avoid an outpouring of emotions. Which is fine, because Bucky is too ragged right now to properly outpour.

"Right," Axel says. "Our objective is to keep aware of Steve's movements, while making certain of our own safety. And to constantly be on the lookout for solutions for the arm. None of us have the technical knowledge to fix it, so we're going to need a third party.

"Meanwhile, we need to figure out what our plans is, and divide it up according to our strengths..."

Steve Rogers leaves the hospital on Friday at 10:32 am. He takes the Metro back to his apartment. Axel tails him on the Metro, keeping his baseball hat pulled low over his stubbled face.

When Steve gets back to his apartment, it's empty. The asset's already killed three agents who were lying in wait, wrapping their bodies in trash bags and disposing of them in three different dumpsters, all at least a block away from the apartment. There's no blood to clean up, but Yasha makes sure that it's spotless all the same.

Steve putters around his apartment, making a bowl of cereal and reading the stack of newspapers that have been piling up. Bucky crouches on the opposite rooftop with a rifle provided by the asset, and he keeps Steve in his crosshairs.

He watches Steve flip through every page of every paper. He reads the local, national, world, sports, and lifestyle sections, in addition to the comics. He skims over everything else, even the classifieds.

Bucky is riveted. Steve lifts his finger to his mouth and licks it every five pages or so. His forehead crinkles when he reads something he doesn't like, and he laughs at the comics until he winces, putting a hand to the bandages under his t-shirt and steadying his knitting ribs.

None of these gestures - not even the wincing, sadly - are new. He knows them all, but they've been forgotten and washed of their color with time.

Steve gets up to grab something from the refrigerator, and he swings the door shut with his hip.

Bucky knows that move.

Steve carefully folds each paper along the creases when he finishes it, setting it aside for wrapping or rereading later.

And Bucky knows that move.

Steve eats his snack and leaves the spoon hanging out of his mouth, getting distracted by the sports section and forgetting about the spoon for several minutes.

And Bucky *knows* that move - has bopped him over the head and pulled the forgotten utensil out

of his mouth, exchanging it for a kiss, no less than a dozen times.

He remembers now.

He remembers all of this, and yet it's all new. Because when Steve did these things before, they were regular and ordinary and as un-special as they could get while still belonging to *him*. Bucky had certainly never taken Steve for granted, but he'd accepted him as a given back in Brooklyn, and he could watch Steve read the damn paper without feeling this tightness in his lungs and belly.

Now, though, every movement feels like Bucky's waited seventy years for it. There's seventy years of meaning invested into every expression. And every gesture feels more significant to Bucky than entire wars and regime changes that have happened over the course of his extended lifetime.

It's too much for even the happiest man, and Bucky's body isn't built to hold happiness anymore. It feels strange, like it's leaking out of him the way Steve's blood had seeped through the holes in his uniform. He feels like he's leaving puddles of unfamiliar excitement everywhere he goes, and he's constantly on edge for someone to say, 'That's not for you; put it back.'

He's acting like a child, is what he's doing. Regression. How long until he starts drooling down his sweatshirt and pissing the bed and believing in fairy tales, thinking he can talk to Steve?

It's that last one that worries him the most. He doesn't want Steve to send him away; he wants to watch right here, just like this, possibly for another seventy years. Can he have that? Or will he fuck it up?

History is on the side of 'fucking it up,' but Bucky's never been so unwaveringly aware that something *must* work. He'll follow the plan; they'll find a way to fix the arm; and he'll kill anyone who even looks at Steve uncharitably.

Him. Not the asset. There's one cause that Bucky has always willingly and unquestioningly killed for, and it's that man in the apartment across the street. He doesn't have to think about it, just checks his grip on the rifle and scans the street below and roofline opposite for threats.

Don't fuck up. Don't fuck up. *Don't* fuck up.

When Bucky isn't perched and primed above Steve's apartment, they spend most of their time tracking Hydra. He hates having to leave Steve and trust that he'll be okay for a few hours, and he tries to time it so that they do most of their Hydra-clearing while Steve has guests over.

The blonde woman lives next door, so she drops in fairly frequently, likely thinking that she's watching out for Steve. The black man comes over nearly every evening to spend time with Steve. Both visitors are constantly armed, so Bucky can at least breathe a little easier when he turns over his body.

This way, he also doesn't have to know which of them Steve is involved with. He likes his ignorance in this regard.

Their approach to wiping out the remnants of Hydra in DC isn't so much 'divide and conquer' as it is 'do what Axel says.' Axel is the only one of them patient enough to spend hours sifting through the information on the internet to cross-reference bases and aliases and informants. He's also very comfortable with designating.



Bucky picks a few pockets to provide Axel with a fistful of bills, and while he thinks that three grand is enough to set up a permanent base of operations, all it gets them is a flat, silver computer.

Bucky knows computers – they’ve been part of Department X and Hydra for many years, and while he’s never used one, he’s probably one of the few living authorities on the way their designs and functions have changed over the years. He’s seen them go from taking up entire rooms to fitting in the palm of a white-coat’s hand, and he knows that they can access swaths of information at the tap of a key.

But he has no desire to learn; Axel takes on the responsibility of learning about the internet and Wi-Fi and dropping pins and everything else necessary to access the lump sum of Hydra data that can lead them to the people who want to hurt Steve.

The asset knows some of Hydra’s codes, and he helps filter the information. SHIELD and other law enforcement agencies have cleaned out some of the pockets, but Hydra has always operated with multiple layers of trust. There were plenty of agents within Hydra who believed the ‘Cryofreeze’ story, and that’s what’s been leaked to the public. When you dig and decrypt, though, there’s more to the data than what’s on the surface.

They find a small contingent of agents hiding in a factory that used to make supplies for the war and has since been repurposed to make tiny figurines of horses. Bucky can’t imagine there’s this much demand for these ugly things, but he’s marked by poverty; he can’t see the purpose in keeping nonfunctional tchotchke around, unless it makes Steve smile.

The asset shoots four agents and stacks the bodies for Bucky to take care of. Three of their faces (what’s left of them, anyway) don’t appear to know that death is even upon them, but the fourth agent had clearly seen the asset. He reaches for his weapon in death, and Bucky takes some pleasure in disarming him before throwing all four bodies into the incinerator.

It’s slow going with the metal arm whirring helplessly at his side, rigid and jolting tiny shivers of pain down his side and back, but he takes care of the bodies because it’s his turn.

Then they make camp in the factory, reading the layer of dust over the machines and the hidden Hydra control room to mean that this wasn’t exactly a regularly assigned post.

Yasha stockpiles a stack of water bottles, canned foods, and painkillers practically out of thin air, and they try their best to establish a regular eating schedule. They’ve never been responsible for this before, and it’s always impossible to know who’s going to be on top a few hours or days from now, but they try to eat at ten AM and ten PM. They go through water more quickly than they should, and, though they don’t talk about it, they’re pretty much eating the Motrin in handfuls.

And that’s how they eke out shelter for sleeping and research. It’s not that hard; another thing they don’t talk about is how they would have been just as capable of this ten or twenty or even thirty years ago.

But they never seriously tried. With all of the guards and devices and restraints at their disposal, Department X’s greatest weapon may well have been their ability to plant and nurture apathy.

It takes a common purpose, like Steve, to get all their pistons running.

But when they do, they’re *very* effective.

Bucky returns to the rooftop after the asset intercepts a vehicle of Hydra agents traveling into DC

to recover equipment. He absently notices that there's blood under his fingernails, and he wishes that they had access to running water. There's none at the horse factory, so they've been using public restrooms to clean up, even though it increases their exposure. He supposes he should be grateful that there's no brain matter in his beard.

He retrieves the Barrett M98 from its hiding place, feeling the old familiar sense of calm slip into place when he flicks off the safety and looks through the scope. Steve isn't in his living room or his bedroom, so he assumes that Steve's taking a shower. A minute later, though, the building door opens and Steve walks out with the black man, laughing and completely throwing Bucky for a loop.

Steve should be resting – it's only been a few weeks since he was shot, fell into the river, and nearly drowned. Even with super healing, it's too soon for him to be mobile, and they're not ready to track him all over the city. They need more time – Steve needs to take more time.

But Steve and his friend are disappearing around the corner, and Bucky is frantically stashing the rifle and swinging down the fire escape, pulling his sweatshirt around him and making sure that his gloves are secure. He yanks the brim of his hat down and starts after the men, doing his best to make his body look small and invisible among the other pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Steve and the man, who Steve identifies as 'Sam' and the wind picks it up and carries it back to Bucky's ears, walk to the nearest Metro stop and board with ease. Bucky ducks through an employee entrance, barely making it onto their train before the doors close and stashing himself in the car behind theirs. Hardly anyone registers Bucky's presence, but he can't help but notice the tremor that runs through the train when people realize it's Captain America riding in their midst.

It's the best feeling to see people notice and react to Steve. In Bucky's experience, Steve gets overlooked until something awful is happening like he's having an asthma attack or he's getting the shit kicked out of him or he's just bleeding for *no reason* other than the fact that he's Steve. And then people look at him with pity.

But now, most of the women (and a few men) are openly ogling, and the other passengers are craning their necks to see what everyone else is looking at. Part of blending in is imitating these unconscious crowd reactions, so Bucky cranes his neck as well, and he sees that Steve is mostly oblivious to the attention. Sam, however, looks wide-eyed.

A teenage girl behind Bucky gets out of her seat, her friends simultaneously giggling at her and shrieking at her to 'stop!' She makes her way through to Steve's car. Bucky is instantly on alert, his finger tracing the outline of a knife strapped to his calf, but she just asks Steve to sign her Captain America backpack. He blinks out of wherever his mind's been and beams at the girl as he accepts the red marker she hands him and scribbles his "artist's signature" on the white part of her bag. Giggling, she makes her way back to her seat where her friends are gaping at her.

This is going to be a very stressful ride if more of them try stunts like that. Bucky feels his pulse skyrocket every time a passenger reaches into his pocket or her bag, and he feels a bead of sweat slide down his hairline as he tries to appraise just how many possible agents and weapons could be on this train.

Why can't Steve just stay home where Bucky can watch him, dammit? He's not the asset; this isn't his strong suit.

Luckily, Steve and Sam get off a few stops later. Unluckily, they get off at the National Mall, and this just really isn't fair.

Bucky stays several paces behind them as they head for the Museum of American History. It doesn't really surprise Bucky that Steve wants to spend his first post-near death experience outing brushing up on his US history, and Steve's always loved museums, so it makes sense. To his surprise, though, they don't go into the museum proper. They're met by a woman who shakes their hands and escorts them past museum security to a set of private offices.

He skirts around the offices, looking for another way in, when a sign catches his attention.

'Didn't get enough American history? Visit the Captain America exhibit at the Air and Space Museum!'

Bucky's mouth goes dry; here it is. Here's the museum he's been insisting Steve deserved for years, and it's actually real and open and close at hand. With trembling fingers, he reaches out and takes a brochure from the sign's plastic holder, folding it into four and tucking it in his pocket. He doesn't think he's ready to go to it, having always avoided Steve-centric propaganda like the plague, but he needs to know that he didn't dream it up.

After a few minutes of casing, Steve and Sam emerge from the offices, a box in Sam's hands. Steve is twisting behind him to offer thanks to the woman and a small crowd of museum employees, and Bucky catches his own name printed on yellowed tape and sealing the box shut.

He follows them back to the apartment, and then creeps up to the opposite rooftop to see if they'll go through the box. They don't; Steve tucks it away in a closet, and he and Sam spend the rest of the afternoon watching baseball.

Yasha finds the museum flier, and because he doesn't share Bucky's compunctions, but he does want to be useful, he goes to see the exhibit.

He describes it to them, the sheer number of people who'd moved through the exhibit during the hour he spent there; the authentic uniforms and gear; the wall-scale photographs.

The memorial room to Bucky Barnes. With its quotes from friends and family of the deceased soldier. And drawings of him found in Captain America's sketchbooks. And a video of his parents accepting their folded flag and Bucky's medal of honor. And-

"Stop," Bucky tells Yasha. It comes off harsher than he'd meant it.

"Your pop looked real proud in the video, even if your ma was crying," Yasha continues haplessly, a little bit enamored with the idea of parents.

"*Stop*," Bucky commands again. They stare at him, waiting for him to explain, and he wishes sometimes that there was enough space in his mind for things to go unsaid. "Dead men don't have families," he finally confesses.

"Oh. Guess what else I learned," Yasha says, and Bucky is inches away from screaming at him. But Yasha's next words are unexpected.

"I know how Steve survived," he says confidently, and that....does get Bucky's attention.

"How?" Axel asks.

"He crashed a plane into the ocean to stop it from blowing up New York, and he was flash-frozen," Yasha says.

Bucky feels nauseated.

Steve had been frozen.

Had he been...awake when it happened? Aware?

Had he been afraid?

“And it was less than a month after Bucky fell off the train,” Yasha says next, and the sick, helpless feeling creeps up Bucky’s throat.

He needs to see Steve. He needs to reassure himself that Steve hasn’t done something Steve-like over the past seven hours and gotten himself killed through his complete lack of self-preservation.

Crashing a plane to save New York and getting frozen – it’s completely in his character, equal parts self-sacrificing and idiotic.

A part of him wonders if Steve had done it on purpose, but he categorically refuses to acknowledge the idea. The timing is a coincidence.

He *really* needs to get eyes on Steve.

That night, Bucky is watching Steve watch television through his scope. He has no idea what program Steve is watching, but it features women in prison jumpsuits. Steve is laughing at it, but Bucky can see by the bend of his head that he’s only half-paying attention. He’d bet any amount of money that there’s a sketchbook in Steve’s lap, and he’d pay twice as much to know what Steve is drawing.

A movement in the corner of his scope catches his attention, and he redirects his focus.

His pulse booms in his ears.

He sees two figures in dark clothing climbing onto Steve’s balcony from the balcony below.

Analyze.

Breath.

Trigger. Trigger.

The gun resonates deafeningly through the relatively quiet and calm neighborhood, and then everything is silent as residents take stock, make sure nothing’s wrong in *their* neck of the woods, and then gradually start the hum of noise back up.

Bucky looks up to see that Steve’s moved onto his balcony. He looks down at the bodies with shock in his eyes, and then he lifts his gaze.

He’s smart enough to trace the trajectory of the rounds. His gaze searches the rooftop above his eye line, and if not for the small safety ledge on the roof, he’d be looking straight at Bucky.

Bucky sees him take a few steps back, and he’s hit with a memory. It’s of Steve jumping over a literal pit of fire in Bucky’s first prison camp, barely making the catwalk but stretching out his hands and trusting that Bucky would catch him if his leap was just a few inches too short. And somehow, it wasn’t.

Bucky takes off like a gunshot, shouldering the rifle and pumping his arms to run at top speed. Not a second later, he hears the smack of sneakers on the roof, and then the pounding of Steve's footsteps behind him.

He makes himself run faster. He scrambles up a pointed roofline and then jumps to a lower roof, this one full of plants and patio furniture. Steve crashes down after him, and he can't stop. His arm feels like something's loose and tearing through muscles as he swings it with his momentum, but he can't stop.

"Bucky!" Steve shouts from behind him, and it's the first thing he's said to Bucky since 1944. His name sounds so damn *good* and familiar in Steve's voice, but he can't let it distract him. He can't let Steve actually get a good look at him, because Bucky thinks everything is showing on his face right now.

Steve is only yards behind him. He feigns a jump, then runs along the outer edge of a roof, counting on Steve's terrible banking. Steve can't stop his momentum and goes over the side; but he grabs a balcony railing and hoists himself back up before the panic can even bloom in Bucky's gut.

It buys him seconds. He jumps to one more rooftop, banging his shin on the ledge as he lands, and grabs the stairwell door. It opens, and he flies down the stairs, his own panting breath ringing in his ears, and the clamor of Steve yanking the door open after him resonating throughout the stairwell.

He ducks through a door and runs down the hallway. He's surrounded by offices of flimsy walls and crowded desks, and he slips under one of them, heart pounding.

Then he does the only thing that's going to get him out of this. There's no time to write a message, so he'll have to pray for the best. He closes his eyes, and sends out the asset.

Bucky is incredibly cautious the next time he ventures out to the roof. Steve knows where he's been hiding, and he knows that Bucky is armed. Even Steve isn't blithe enough to disregard the fact that his home is in someone's crosshairs.

But there's no other direct line of sight into the apartment. He'll have to trust that he can escape again, with the asset's help, should Steve come after him.

He crawls to the roof's edge and spots Steve below. He's sitting at the kitchen table and drawing, a sandwich dangling from his left hand.

Something to Bucky's side catches his eye, and he turns his head to see an identical sandwich. This one is wrapped in plastic, but the bread is the same hue, and the peanut butter is oozing out in the same places.

The roof sandwich doesn't have jelly, however, and Steve's does.

Which is the biggest clue as to the sandwich's origins.

Bucky picks up the sandwich but doesn't eat it, holding the plastic up to the sun in case it's been tampered with. He tucks it in his pocket, likely crushing it, to eat later when he's back at the factory.

Then he sees a note written on a brown napkin. It had been covered by the sandwich but,

unweighted, now threatens to blow away in the gentle breeze. Bucky pins it to the roof with a finger and then looks down at it, trying to steel himself for whatever words he can see scribbled in Steve's handwriting.

'In case my guardian angel gets hungry,' is all it says, and Bucky breathes a sign of relief that it contains neither pleas nor condemnations. Steve is just being...helpful. He's being Steve. And Bucky aches for him, but he's not fucking this up.

Even later, when Steve tests his resolve by throwing open the windows and playing Bucky's favorite Glenn Miller records, and making a pie crust from scratch before filling it with Mrs. Barnes' famous apple-and-peach pie filling, and finally taking his goddamn shield out to the balcony to polish it in the sunshine...even then, he ignores the ache.

Steve is probably trying to put him at ease, but he has no idea that he's been tormenting Bucky all day. These are all things that Bucky can't have; but Steve's so good that what's been done to Bucky would never occur to him. It would never cross his mind to think that he can't win back a man who's been dead and dying for seven decades with sandwiches and pies and jazz.

If Steve actually knew what was broken in Bucky, he'd have his own team of snipers out here, and the note would read 'Please don't make this hard.'

So he keeps watch. 'Guardian angel' indeed.

It gets progressively harder, and Bucky almost wants to hate Steve for how cruel he's being. He can't hate him – of course he can't. And Steve doesn't know what effect he's having.

It isn't fair – but that's normal for Bucky.

Still, his brand of unfairness usually comes in the form of restriction and punishment. This is a sweeter hell, watching Steve roam through his apartment in nothing but a small, terrycloth towel, drops of water dripping down his back. Or watching him stretch in the middle of his living room, muscles rebelling against his exercise clothing as he bends and twists. Or watching him fall asleep in flannel pajama pants and not much else, the draw string loosening through the night.

Bucky's mouth waters, and he wants. He doesn't go. He won't fuck up.

It's a relief when Hydra tries to get the jump on him, six agents grappling over the sides of the roof and Bucky shooting the first wave with his silenced pistol and luck before sending the asset out to finish them.

Bullets and knives have nothing on the lethality of Steve Rogers' hipbones.

Steve doesn't give up, and Bucky doesn't really expect him to. He relents somewhat and allows the others to spend more time watching over Steve or trailing him through the city as Steve runs errands, and jogs, and participates in the Rebuild Washington project.

Steve likely knows he's being watched, but Bucky has three advantages. Steve never knows what mannerisms to look for in a crowd, and he still hasn't got a head-on look at Bucky.

On any given day, Bucky may or may not have facial hair. His hair might be down or held back in a ponytail. He might be dressed as a hobo, or a runner, or college student, depending on what

Bucky finds at the Laundromat.

So Steve knows, but chasing Bucky down and leaving the sandwich in thanks is his only attempt to make contact for months. If not for the fact that Steve is blatantly trying to make Bucky come to *him*, then Bucky would think he'd given up.

But he doesn't send a direct message again until October.

In the past six months, Bucky's overseen Steve's recovery in entirety. He's killed five Hydra agents for Steve, and the asset has killed 42 more.

Meanwhile, the arm is stuck. They've taken to slinging it across their body with a torn sheet and tucking it beneath their jacket or sweatshirt. It's the only thing that keeps it from jostling, which is the only thing that keeps it from dragging against raw nerve endings underneath their skin. A piece is poking into their ribcage and bruising purple and black up and down Bucky's left side, and when he pulls it tight to wrap it, he sees a loose bolt moving underneath his skin.

He hopes it isn't sharp.

It's starting to get cold (for non-Russians), which is why Bucky thinks that Steve ups his game. It's so very like Steve to worry about Bucky being *cold* that it's unsurprising.

And he's made it this long without responding to Steve, so he thinks that he can handle it.

Axel follows Steve to an art supply store one day, and he comes back with chalk. There must be at least twenty different colors emanating from these skinny little sticks of chalk far different from the thick, slab-like pieces Steve had wanted in another life.

Steve starts to draw on his windows. It's fascinating because Bucky gets to actually *see* his artwork for the first time in ages, rather than catching glimpses through scopes and binoculars. And Bucky doesn't think anything of it at first – Steve had always sketched the Brooklyn Bridge and the docks and Coney Island, so of course he's sketching these things now.

But it expands. Steve draws a mural of the church where they'd gotten their sacraments and confessed every week. He draws a crowded dance hall with a name that Bucky can't remember. He draws faces of Bucky's friends and family members that make Bucky cringe with how long ago that was for him, and how recent in Steve's memory.

And he draws them.

He draws himself skinny and small, curling under Bucky's arm. And he draws the same scene from a different time – Bucky limping through Europe under Captain America's arm, out of his mind with pain and what had, at the time, been a traumatizing captivity.

Even as Bucky scoffs at the idea, he remembers the warmth of pressing up against Steve's side. He felt like every time he looked at Steve, he'd gotten taller, so it made sense in his addled brain that he couldn't look away lest Steve grew too tall and Bucky's head couldn't reach his shoulder anymore.

Steve draws a faceless couple dancing, and writes their lyrics:

*Whenever it's early twilight  
I watch till a star breaks through  
Funny, it's not a star I see  
It's always you*

*Whenever I roam through roses  
And lately I often do  
Funny, it's not a rose I touch  
It's always you*

*If a breeze, caresses me  
It's really you strolling by  
If I hear a melody  
It's merely the way you sigh*

*Wherever you are, you're near me  
You dare me to be untrue  
Funny, each time I fall in love  
It's always you*

And Bucky recognizes these scenes from their life together for what they are. This is the plea he's been hoping Steve wouldn't make.

The chalk drawings cover every window on the east side of Steve's apartment by now, and they impede Bucky's sight, but he can live with that.

The others want to see, even the asset. Yasha's the only one who's seen Steve's drawings before, and even he is amazed by how talented Steve is.

"Bucky," Axel asks him hesitantly in their apartment. "I know we talked about keeping distance between you and Steve for all of our safety, but maybe...maybe we misread how Steve would react to...well, us."

"No, we didn't," Bucky promises. "He's a good man. He won't know how to handle this. And he'll try. And it will just hurt all of us, him especially."

"He obviously misses you," Axel tries again.

"Better than breaking his heart."

Then Steve erases the middle third of the Brooklyn Bridge, blotting it out and leaving the supports and cables floating in mid-air. He writes in the empty space, 'Come inside. I need to talk to you.'

Bucky doesn't, but fucking up is looking so much closer.

In November, Steve sends his friend Sam out to get Bucky. Bucky isn't expecting anyone to climb up the fire escape, because he's got eyes on Steve as he does sit-ups in his living room.

"So you're the dude that watches over Steve. We've met, you know," Sam says as he catches Bucky unawares. Bucky bares his teeth at him, swinging the rifle to point at Sam's heart. It's difficult with only working arm; the tripod is the only reason he can even use it.

"We haven't," he growls back, his voice gravelly from lack of use. Most of the talking he's done in months has been in his head, and they don't have handlers to communicate their needs to anymore.

"You ripped my wing off," Sam pouts. He's clearly met the asset then, but Bucky isn't going to



reveal that.

“Back away or I’ll shoot you. The only reason you’re still alive is because you’re Steve’s friend, and I have good reflexes,” he says.

“I’m supposed to deliver a message,” Sam says, sounding about as excited about it as Bucky does. “He wants you to come inside. There’s hot food, and clean clothes, and a shower,” he trails off, running his eyes over Bucky and clearly finding him deficient in all of these things.

“Also, he’s really moping over this,” Sam says a minute later and more kindly. “This has seriously been eating at him for months. Whatever’s going on between you two, it’s better if you talk about it and work your issues out. Instead of, you know, stalking him with a semi-automatic.”

Bucky reaches for the Glock at his hip, and he levels it on Sam with a fluid motion.

“Go. Away,” he growls, and when Sam doesn’t move, he fires a shot six inches from his head.

“Okay, okay!” Sam grumbles, but his voice is at least an octave higher than it was a minute ago. “I will deliver your response to Steven. The roof is yours, man,” he says, and then he goes back the way he came.

Bucky turns back to Steve’s apartment to see Steve looking at him through the living room windows, his brow creased in disappointment.

In December, Bucky fucks up and gives in. Without really knowing what his tipping point was or what single, errant thought had breached it, he leaves the adjacent building, crosses the street, and breaks into Steve’s building. He uses the asset’s lock pick to let himself into Steve’s apartment, feeling like he’s stepped through a mirror when he views the familiar space from a different angle. The kitchen is on his right now, and the bedroom is on his left.

He pads silently for the bedroom, knowing that Steve is asleep. He just wants to see him and listen to him breathe for a few minutes, like he used to, to make sure Steve’s okay. It’s a pointless urge – Steve can survive gunshots now, and he’s hardly going to wheeze in his sleep. But Bucky reconciles his presence here at all by telling himself that he just needs to check; he just needs to make sure, and then he’ll leave.

He creeps into the room, running his eyes over Steve’s smooth skin and the exposed swell of his ass beneath his wayward pants. He can feel Steve’s warmth from where he’s standing, and then he realizes that he’s at the edge of the bed.

His hand lifts, but then he pulls it back. This is more than he deserves, and he shouldn’t touch what isn’t his.

Steve’s breathing sounds okay. It sounds hearty and deep, actually. Everything’s fine here.

He can go.

Dazed, he lowers himself to his knees. He rests his hand on the mattress so it can’t get away from him, and then he pillows his chin on his wrist.

From this angle, he can see Steve’s back rise and fall as his lungs expand and contract. It’s soothing, and it makes him feel alive.

It's just as painful as he'd imagined.

When he's looked his fill, and he starts to worry about the length of time he's spent inside, he pushes himself to his feet and turns for the door, still fighting the urge to stroke Steve's back or kiss his temple.

Something barrels past him in the darkened room.

"Don't go," Steve whispers from in front of the door. He's physically barring Bucky from leaving the room, and his chest is heaving, and exactly how long has he been *awake*?

"Move," Bucky commands flatly. Steve reaches up to turn the light on, and Bucky panics. He grabs Steve's wrist and wrenches it away from the light switch, knowing how much easier it would be if he could use the metal arm. As it is, he thinks he only succeeds because he shocks Steve.

"No lights," he blurts, shaking his hair into his face just in case Steve's eyesight is that good.

"Okay," Steve says just as quickly, turning his hand to touch Bucky's wrist. Very slowly, like he's waiting for Bucky to attack him, he slides his palm down Bucky's forearm and up his bicep, over his shoulder and then across his back. He hits something connected to the arm, and it makes Bucky wince. "Sorry," Steve whispers, and then he's pulling Bucky in and wrapping both his arms around him.

It's too tight against his slung arm, and his flesh arm hangs at his side, unaware what it's supposed to be doing now that Steve is touching him. He doesn't squirm or fight it, just stands there in Steve's arms, relishing the feeling without contributing to it in any way.

Then Steve nudges Bucky's head with his chin, and Bucky automatically tucks his head into Steve's neck, flipping their positions from long ago.

Steve laughs. "Finally, Bucky," he mumbles into Bucky's hair. "This has been killing me. You're finally here."

Bucky hears the optimism in his voice, and he lets himself believe for a moment that this is for him. It feels heavenly, which is why he pulls away.

"No. No..." Steve pleads with him, his hands releasing Bucky even as his words argue.

Bucky takes another step back and looks at Steve. He feels like he can see a physical smudge of blood and grime and sickness on Steve's skin where they'd touched, and it disgusts him. He has to get out of here; he has to get out now.

"Please let me help you, Bucky. I don't know what they did to you, and I don't know how bad it was, but I know that SHIELD can help you. You have my word."

"No," Bucky says, continuing to back away. He edges toward the window as his backup escape route, in the event that Steve won't move away from the door.

Steve flips on the light then, and Bucky growls at him as he winces at the sudden brightness. Steve's eyes run over his body – his dirty coat with its empty sleeve, the bulge at his middle where his arm is strapped, his stringy hair, and whatever's lurking behind his eyes.

"Your arm," Steve says, choosing the one thing that Bucky will actually listen to. "They can fix your arm. I know this guy; he can build you a better one, or he can fix the one you've got."

"I don't trust SHIELD," Bucky tells him. It's true; he'd rather have a broken arm with its weight and its infections and its rubbing, than hand them over to another corrupt organization.

"SHIELD isn't perfect, Bucky, but it's not Hydra. I know it doesn't seem like it, but they're very, very different."

"No." Steve starts forward and Bucky allows himself to be backed into a corner, Steve's warmth and his smell and the softness of his skin are completely screwing with all of Bucky's instincts and quieting his alarm bells

"Why not?" Steve asks, looking so damn earnest in the harsh overhead light. Bucky doesn't answer. "I don't want to lose you again," Steve confesses softly.

"I'm lost," Bucky argues. "For good."

"I don't accept that," Steve says stubbornly. "I love you. You're not lost to me."

Bucky feel like pieces of him are breaking and falling off, just like on the helicarrier. So he says the one thing that he knows will get Steve to back off.

"I barely remember you," he lies, seeing the grief crest over Steve's face like a wave. It's sudden and sharp, and it churns Bucky's stomach. "It was a lifetime ago. You think I waited seventy years?"

Steve looks punched, and Bucky clenches his jaw to hold his words in. They both need this, as awful as it is in this moment. This is the quickest route to the finish.

Then Steve leans down to kiss him, and Bucky's mouth opens on a gasp. It's like their airy kiss in the river, and nothing like it. It's like a dozen kisses behind trees and in abandoned barns in Europe, quietly frenzied with longing and with fear that someone would discover them.

It's like Brooklyn, the two of them hiding from the world in a bedroom and not giving credence to anyone's opinions but their own.

Steve pulls back.

"You're lying," he says gruffly, like he can taste the memories on Bucky's lips. "*I know* you, and you're lying. You do remember me, and you do want me."

Bucky stares at him from under lidded eyes.

"Do you trust me?" he finally asks.

"Yes!" Steve insists, his fingers twitching against Bucky's neck in agitation.

"Then I probably have a good reason for turning you down, right?"

Steve stares at him for a minute. Neither of them says anything, then Steve starts to laugh. It's so bitter and joy-less that it feels foreign coming from him.

"Okay," he says with a twisted smile. "Okay, Bucky." He backs away, and Bucky rushes for the door. He doesn't even make it out of the building before he's tripping over his feet and leaning against a wall for support. He ducks into the stairwell and closes his eyes. He's going to need someone else to get his body back to the factory.

In January, Sam comes out to the roof to extend the offer again. Bucky doesn't point the gun at him this time, because he's too exhausted.

"You look a little green," Sam says in greeting.

"Septicemia," Bucky offers back quietly. They can't find anyone they trust to do surgery on them without re-enslaving them, so apparently, this is how they're going out. It's more or less been decided. And Bucky just wants to watch over Steve for as long as possible.

"You know, SHIELD could help with that," Sam tells him. "I know Steve said you don't trust them," he cuts off Bucky's protest, "But we really think they're the only ones equipped to handle this. And Steve doesn't even know how bad it is."

Bucky shifts his weight so that he's facing Sam, and Sam comes to squat before him. It's remarkable, given that Bucky shot at him the last time they talked. And the asset ripped his wing off before that.

"Look, Steve swears that if you surrender to SHIELD, he won't push you. He will be there for you through everything to make sure you're safe and they're not going to screw you over, and he'll be there as a friend. He stressed that, like, ten times. He's not asking for anything from you. No big gay super soldier romance; he just wants to help."

"I know," Bucky tells him.

"Why are you so determined not to accept his help?" Sam asks a little sadly. Bucky turns his head back to look at Steve through the kitchen windows, and Sam waits him out.

"There are things about me that he doesn't know. Things that would horrify him, and turn his stomach," he tries to explain.

"Dude, I promise you, that the only thing Steve needs to know about you is the fact that you're alive. He needs to know you'll be okay. He's in bad shape now, and if you die from your...I don't actually know what's wrong with you, but if you die from it, it's going to tear him apart."

Bucky closes his eyes and nods.

"One more reason to keep my distance," he says. Sam stands up at that.

"Come *on*," he pleads. "If you don't give a shit about yourself, do this for Steve. The guy basically went suicidal when you died the last time. He's my friend," he adds when Bucky doesn't say anything. "I thought he was your friend too."

It confirms Bucky's worst fears. Worse than dying, worse than being captured again, is the fear that Steve meant to put that plane in the ice. The fear that he meant to slip underneath the frigid waters to avoid whatever wasn't waiting for him at the other end of that flight.

He feels hot tears sting the corners of his eyes, and he takes a shaky breath.

"I'll have to talk to...my brothers," he says. Sam raises an eyebrow and looks around the roof.

"Um, okay. Who? Can I get them for you?"

"My brothers," Bucky repeats. "But I need you to go away for that." Sam gapes at him for a moment, then he closes his mouth and squints at Bucky.

A minute later, Sam disappears back over the fire escape.

And Bucky inhales a painful, elongated breath. He slumps back against the wall and closes his eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for taking the lovely trip with me that was Chyetirye. I hope that you will join me for the second part of the Ipseity series, Chasm. Chasm will be split between Steve's and Bucky's points of view as Bucky turns himself into SHIELD, gets that nasty arm fixed, and works on fixing his relationship with Steve while dealing with a big secret (hint: the secret is our bros Axel, Yasha, and the asset). It will still be somewhat angsty, but I'll stop bookmarking torture pages for references.

To find out when Chasm is posted (I predict sometime this month), you can either subscribe to the Ipseity verse, check out my [tumblr](#), or trust the universe.

Thank you again for taking this deeply disturbing and incredibly fun journey with me, and I really hope to see your names pop up again! Thanks for your feedback and support along the way.

Works inspired by this [one](#) [Chyetirye \[Podfic\]](#) by [farkenshnoffingottom](#), [Fractured Mending](#) by [crankyfractal \(upquarkAO3\)](#), [mmouse15](#)

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